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Irish National Self in the Films of Joe Comerford and Thaddeus O'Sullivan

by

Gerald Stephen WHITE

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

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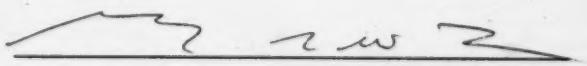

30 september 1998

Gerald Stephen WHITE
10720-83d Ave. #101
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E5
Canada

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Irish National Self in the Films of Joe Comerford and Thaddeus O'Sullivan* submitted by Gerald Stephen White in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Comparative Literature - Film Studies.

W. BEARD, Supervisor

N. RAHIMIEH

H. ZWICKER

25 September 1999

Abstract:

The films of Joe Comerford and Thaddeus O'Sullivan have as a common project the problematization of Irish identity. Their films deal with Irishness in varying degrees of directness, but they all illustrate the pitfalls and possibilities of varying forms of nationalism. Further, both filmmakers show that Irish identity is inherently fragmented and unstable, very much in contradiction to prevailing romanticism about "the colonizers" and "the colonized." While their films sometimes lapse into generic convention or sectarianism, they are at other moments examples of the possibilities of a postcolonial cinema, one that is very much in line with the cultural negotiation and reconsideration that defines much of contemporary Irish life.

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Introduction: Irish Cinema and the Pull of History

Ireland's cinema, like so much about that small island, is defined by paradox. An understanding of contemporary Irish cinema should not so much seek to resolve these conflicts, but to incorporate the questions that they raise, hopefully to the end that easy simplicities may become complicated. The filmmakers Joe Comerford and Thaddeus O'Sullivan have, throughout their films, centralized just such complications, and because of the ideologically cantankerous nature of their films, they make a most illuminating case study in the emergence of an Irish national cinema over the last 20 years or so. The analyses of their films that will follow relies on a certain amount of groundwork with regards to their geographic and cinematic specificity. National identity on the island of Ireland is an extremely complex concept, and both of these filmmakers are important for the way that they respond to the often forgotten or repressed heterogeneity of Irish identity. The films themselves are quite distinct from many recent "Irish Movies" that have been hailed in the mainstream media as characterizing that country's cinematic re-birth, and because of that difference they call into question the definition of a "national cinema" as opposed to the increasingly placeless cinematic entity that is Classical Hollywood Cinema.[1] These issues of nationalism and aesthetic form also echo contemporary literary debates, most clearly the "world literature vs. national literatures" debate between Claus Clüver and Horst Steinmetz. These films, then, present crucial problems that both embody and transcend their historical moment and geopolitical origins, and a thorough understanding of Comerford and O'Sullivan illuminates many of the most pressing issues currently faced both by Ireland as it attempts to develop a national cinema and the rest of the world as it seeks to move into a post-colonial era.

The very word "Ireland" has been known to cause fierce battles among scholars and militants alike, so some terminological groundwork is of central importance before beginning any kind of analysis. The word "Ireland" is used in this essay to denote the entire island, which has on its shores two states and many cultures. One of these states is the Republic of Ireland, also known as Éire, which gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1921. The other state on the island is Northern Ireland, a British province whose governance, at this writing, is very much a work in progress following the acceptance of the Good Friday Accord in May 1998 by referenda in both the Republic and the North. Northern Ireland will hereafter be referred to as "N.I."

N.I. should not be (although often is) confused with the much older geographic designation "Ulster." Ireland has historically been divided into 32 counties in four provinces. The provinces (which are medieval in origin) are Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, Connaught in the west, and Ulster in the north. The ancient province of Ulster has always had nine counties. The modern province of N.I., however, has six counties. This is because in 1920, during the Anglo-Irish war (which began in 1919 and would eventually lead to Irish independence) the British were preparing for the eventuality of either independence or Home Rule. Part of these plans involved making accommodations for those inhabitants of Ireland who considered themselves British.[2] While an original plan was to exclude the entire province of Ulster from any Home Rule or independence agreements, this plan was eventually revised to include only those counties with a clear Protestant majority. This plan was institutionalized in the Government of Ireland act of 1920, which established the six county N.I. configuration: counties Derry, Fermanagh, Down, Tyrone, Antrim and Armagh. The counties of

Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan, although part of Ulster, remained outside the partition drawn by this act and became part of what would, after independence, be known as the Free State of Ireland.[3]

The very idea of Irish national self, then, is deeply fragmented, although as both Comerford and O'Sullivan seem to understand (perhaps O'Sullivan understands it more clearly than Comerford), this fragmentation is not something to be overcome, but to be understood. Indeed, the most important difference between these two filmmakers is how they represent ethnic, religious and national heterogeneity, and this is a crucial issue in the context of Irish post-colonialism. In the case of Ireland, those who are easily tagged as "the colonizers" are also reasonably understood as part of "the Irish." This is a quandary that can be traced back to the very beginnings of Irish colonialism. Joep Leerssen has written of "the entire ambiguity of the Anglo-Irish policy of the 19th century: the Ascendancy[4] can claim the rights of both loyal English subjects (on the basis of their Protestantism and their role in guarding the Protestant, English interest in an unruly country) and citizens of the Kingdom of Ireland, whose interests are at variance with those of Britain in matters of trade and industry" (298). Indeed, early attempts towards Irish independence, such as the unsuccessful 1798 United Irishmen rebellion,[5] were led by Protestant settlers. "The Settlers," then, have always been very much British but also very much Irish, and this creates many problems in enunciating their place in a post-colonial reality. This duality of identity goes both ways, and the one of the most potent realizations of an Irish cultural identity, the Celtic Revival, was from the beginning based in a combination of, not a choice between, Protestant/Anglo-Saxon and Catholic/Gaelic traditions. Declan Kiberd notes that "[t]he thesis of the Catholicized Protestant and the

Protestantized Catholic had been implicit in the Irish revival from the outset" (1995: 424). Because of the dualistic quality of its colonizers and its "locals," Ireland is a space of mandatory hybridity.

Leerssen has also noted that "[t]he two demographic groups of Northern Ireland are intermingled geographically (if not socially), so that a physical separation of the two is impossible. And indeed, the very attempt at separation would need to be questioned as a potentially dangerous one, since on closer scrutiny its motive appears to be the creation of *a state without minorities* - a motive with disconcertingly totalitarian overtones" (17-18, emphasis his). In place of this kind of ethnic cleansing, then, an Irish post-colonialism must be first and foremost an idea that incorporates, and indeed centralizes, heterogeneity. Luke Gibbons writes that "it is only when hybridity becomes truly reciprocal rather than hierarchical that the encounter with the culture of the colonizer ceases to be detrimental to one's development" (180), and the presence or absence of this reciprocal hybridity is the characterizing difference in the way that these films represent their respective "others," who are often Protestants. Further, that both films represent these "others" as women is especially important in the context of Irish pluralism. The Republic is too often understood (especially by extremist Unionists) as a repressively Catholic (and therefore anti-Protestant) and anti-feminist state. As discussed in the chapter dealing with him, Comerford's film *High Boot Benny* does much to fuel this kind of prejudice, portraying women as dangerous and Protestants as being somewhere where they don't belong. O'Sullivan's films, however (especially *December Bride*), show Protestants to be a fully realized ethnic group with a place in a heterogeneous nation.

More so than in many cases, then, Irish cinema has a way of confounding many theoretical paradigms. This essay draws upon post-colonial theory in trying to illuminate important issues about an Irish national cinema, although the terms "post-colonial" and "national cinema" are highly problematic in the Irish case. Rushing head-on into these films without a brief introduction to the problems these terms present would lead to an inadequate understanding of the films at hand, and this introduction seeks to problematize, more than clarify, some of these rather central aspects of recent critical theory.

Postcolonial Irelands

Postcolonial theory has, over the last decade, been among the "growth industries" in critical practice, although discussions of Ireland in this context are difficult to come by. This is partially because Irish culture and politics do not fit easily into binaries such as "center/margin" or "colonizers/colonized" so central to much postcolonial theory, although Ireland's status as England's oldest colony makes its postcolonial condition seem rather beyond debate to anyone informed on the matter. Richard Kearney, Declan Kiberd and Luke Gibbons are the most prominent critics to have recently dealt with contemporary Irish culture through a postcolonial lens, although their perspectives have been challenged (sometimes directly, sometimes implicitly) by critics such as Tom Nairn or James Livesey and Stuart Murray. What these arguments point to is not so much the debateablity of Ireland as a site of colonial struggle or postcolonial reality, but the differing ways in which the incredibly long colonial legacy that marks the island (a legacy

longer than just about any other formally colonized space) is manifest on contemporary questions.

Gibbons, especially in his recent collection *Transformations in Irish Culture*, has argued for the presence of a highly distinct postcolonial identity for Ireland. Part of his impetus for drawing attention to the distinct nature of this widespread condition is in large part a response to much recent postcolonial literary criticism, which has, in its essentialized versions, created some very odd bunkmates at the same time that it has excluded some very surprising parties, notably the Irish. He takes issue especially with Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffen's influential collection *The Empire Writes Back*. Gibbons notes that the introduction to this collection denies the possibility of an Irish postcolonialism, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffen claim that in the case of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, "their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as postcolonial" (cited in Gibbons 1996, 174). Gibbons shoots back that:

> This remarkable statement (which does not appear to include Ireland as one of those countries "outside Britain") only makes sense if one identifies the Irish historically with the settler colony in Ireland, the ruling Anglo-Irish interest, thus erasing in the process the entire indigenous population — a view closer, in fact, to "Commonwealth" than post-colonial literature. This indiscriminate application of the term "post-colonial" is indeed a recurrent feature of *The Empire Writes Back*, with the result that Patrick White and Margaret Atwood are considered post-colonial in the same way as Derek Walcott or Chinua Achebe. (1996:174)

Instead of assuming a definition of "postcolonial" that is implicitly essentialist, exclusionary and ultimately reductive, Gibbons has taken very specific aspects of Irish culture and history of the last several centuries to argue not for the "hybridity" which postcolonialists also tend to fetishize, but for a very specific and often contradictory Irish

postcolonialism. He goes on to write about Irish emigration to British colonies such as Australia and America, and the accusations of Irish complicity in supremacist policies. He notes that

> What the immigrant Irish brought with them from the homeland were not the habits of authority fostered by the colonizer but, in fact, a bitter legacy of servitude and ignonomy akin to that experienced by native and African Americans... the Irish historically were classified as "non-white," and treated accordingly.... It was in these circumstances that many Irish sought to identify with the manifest destiny of whiteness, finding in the anti-abolitionist Democratic party a vehicle for their social and political aspirations. This, in effect, meant an uneasy accommodation with what Reginald Horsman describes as "American racial anglo-saxonism." ... The point of drawing attention to the unhealthy intersection of Irish Catholicism with supremacist Anglo-Saxon ideals of whiteness in the United States is to underline the risks inherent in uncritical adulations of "hybridity" as an empowering strategy for diasporic or post-colonial identity... (1996:175-6).

Gibbons' thesis about a conflicted identity as opposed to a romantic idea of "hybridization" is based in a kind of historical and cultural materialism that is becoming more and more common in cultural studies.

Declan Kiberd, in his book *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, has taken an approach that is more text-based, although it seeks to recast many ideas about the way that Irish literature and culture has been understood. In his section on post-colonial Ireland, he draws direct connections with other former British colonies, particularly in Africa. When discussing Irish education right after independence, he notes that

> Nigerian children found themselves sweating through Corneille's *Le Cid* at much the same time that V.S. Naipaul in Trinidad was straining over Dickens and Irish students were picking their way through the essays of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Ngugi [wa Thiong'o] reported from 1960s Kenya that its children, after a decade of independence, were still taught to know themselves only through London and New York.... Chinua Achebe noted that the post-independence élite of readers, "where they exist at all, are only interested in reading textbooks," and he recalled a pathetic letter from a Ghanaian reader of his *Things Fall Apart*, which took the form of a complaint

> that he had not included sample questions and answers at its end, "to ensure his success at next year's school examination." (1995:552-3)

Kiberd's project, then, is to create a sort of pan-postcolonialism. While he is sensitive to the specific character of Irish culture and history, he is far more interested in drawing in non-Irish, especially African, perspectives on what it means to be living after domination. Frantz Fanon is especially important for him, especially in describing the consequences of a post-colonial Irish government's decision to leave patterns of economic underdevelopment. He notes that "[t]he history of independent Ireland bears a remarkable similarity, therefore, to the phases charted by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*" (551-2). This emphasis on the similarities between colonial experience, while less materially grounded and qualified than Gibbons, is nevertheless a similar rejection of the simplified and confused model of postcolonialism put forth by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen.

These understandings of postcolonialism have been both challenged and validated by James Livesey and Stuart Murray, who take issue particularly with Kiberd in the pages of *Irish Historical Studies*. In challenging his parallels of Ireland to Africa, they assert that "[m]uch of the texture of Irish social experience is totally misrepresented if one loses sight of the fact that in quotidian ways Irish social and economic experience was far closer to that of industrializing and modernizing Europe — in fact in many ways anticipating it — than to settler colonies or those in non-white Asia and Africa" (454). Far from rejecting an African parallel to Ireland, though, Livesey and Murray fault Kiberd for reductionism and theoretical essentialism. In following up on Kiberd's thoughts on postcolonial education, they write that

> The problem of Irish education as with [Irish reformer Daniel] Corkery saw it at the end of the first decade of independence fails to translate into a Kenyan context during the same period. In 1938 the bias of British colonial education in Africa meant that although there were forty-two secondary schools in Nigeria, there were none in Kenya.... Ngugi is the right commentator to juxtapose with Corkery but a more profitable comparison might have been made with Nigeria in the 1930s. There is no doubting the genuine schizoid results of colonial education policy, but its articulation within the nature of the modern requires an appropriate detailing of praxis. (455)

Their call, then - appropriate for critics writing in a historical journal - is for a more materialist understanding of national or local conditions. Although they eventually find fault with the work, they conclude that Gibbons' *Transformations in Irish Culture* is argued in a more detailed manner, writing that

> While Kiberd collapses the modern into the colonial, Gibbons instead argues that the specificity of modern Irish culture is the interaction of the post-colonial and classically modern themes within it. The curious relationship of the communities in Ireland to the imperial project, sometimes its object and other times its subject forces Irish culture to be political and highly reflexive. (458)

Finally, though, the historians are left flat by these two cultural critics, although they let them off the hook somewhat when they lament that "there is a tension at the very heart of any post-colonial theory between its attention to the local and the specific and its desire to create a grand narrative of colonization and liberation" (460).

Dwelling on this long book review is important because its overall analysis points to a larger fissure not only in Irish studies but cultural criticism as a whole. Livesey and Murray critique these texts in a way that strongly reflects their methodological assumptions, privileging the historical over the theoretical, the specific over the systematic. While both Kiberd's and Gibbons' wider discussions are firmly rooted in individual visual and literary texts, there is little doubt, especially in Kiberd's case, that moving beyond the specific, and beyond the territory of Ireland as well, is their overall

goal. Indeed, towards the end of his text, Kiberd criticizes the insular nature of Irish studies. He writes of traditionalist Irish historians that "[p]resenting themselves on some occasions for being 'like no other people on earth,' arraigning themselves on others, they often failed to regard Irish experience as representative of human experience, and so they remained woefully innocent of the comparative method, which might have helped them more fully to possess the meaning of their lives" (1995:641). Academically, Irish studies has historically been housed in departments of History or English, and has adapted the reigning disciplinary standards of these fields. What Livesey and Murray's somewhat hostile reception of these texts indicates, to a certain extent, is just how alien a comparative as opposed to strictly national (or, as Kiberd writes, an approach that uses the "widespread nationalist conceit of Irish exceptionality" [644]) is to those working from traditional disciplinary frameworks. This is not to dismiss Livesey and Murray's critique solely on the basis that they are made insecure by its newness: they raise important points about the need for specificity in cultural criticism. Nevertheless, some of their problems with the books clearly have broader methodological implications.

Tom Nairn's widely read book *The Break Up of Britain* also offers critiques of the ways that postcolonial theory is applied to Ireland, although it does not directly engage with other texts on the subject. Although Nairn is one of the British left's best known commentators on matters of sovereignty in the British isles (he is a frequent contributor to *New Left Review*), he is quite skeptical about the validity of Ireland's claim on a post-colonial identity. In trying to dismantle what he calls "The Myth of Anti-Imperialism," he writes that

> the Protestant community is not a "white settler" social group comparable to the Rhodesian whites or the Algerian *pieds noirs* (although it shares many features with these, above all on the level of ideology); its consciousness of its identity and separate interests is not a mass delusion (however many illusions are mixed up in it); "imperialism" *in the sense required* by the theory [of anti-imperialism] does not operate in any part of the Irish island, while "imperialism" in the looser meaning of capitalist or metropolitan dominance and farther development has no interest whatsoever in saving the Protestant state (although it does have a strong interest in preventing the national question from escalating into the pogrom-situation that has been threatened since August 1969). (232)

This is a somewhat astonishing assessment of Irish history, one that manages to forget the massive plantations of the province of Ulster in the 17th century (which sowed the seeds of the current conflict in that region), to say nothing of the plantations and forced resettlements that had plagued the island for hundreds of years before that. Nairn instead seeks to draw a comparison between Northern Protestants and (among others) the Israelis, based on their shared sense of economic (and, implicitly, cultural and intellectual) superiority to the hordes that happen to neighbor them, writing that

> [t]he more advanced and industrialized Belgians developed a successful nationalist movement against the (then) backward and agrarian Netherlands monarchy, between 1815 and 1830. In the later 19th and early 20th century the more economically advanced regions of the Basques and the Catalans developed separatist tendencies against backward central and southern Spain. For a quarter of a century "western" Israel has fought for independence against the less-developed Arab lands on all sides of it. Among the new-nationalist movements in Europe, Scotland is (at least potentially) a new addition to this camp: its National Party perceives a future of super-development based on North Sea oil resources, in contrast to the declining industry of England. The Ulster Protestant territories clearly belong to this group. And one must put the same question about them as about the other members of this rather marginal and select "rich men's club." Does it follow that they have no right to economic self-determination because they are (relatively) economically developed? (249)

The Israel analogy is the one he makes the most use of for the rest of his Northern Ireland chapter, and it is the most flawed part of this rather dubious schema. Leaving aside for the time being the political character of words like "advanced," "backward," or

"developed," the "western" character of Israel and the status of Flemish speakers in contemporary Belgium (all issues that one would expect to be of central importance to a left/socialist critic such as Nairn claims to be), Nairn seems to forget that the defining basis of Israeli self-determination is an (albeit ancient) claim that they were the original inhabitants of the territory, that the Arabs whom they displace are actually the invaders. The validity of this claim is of course disputable, but it is the most basic element of Israeli statehood. No comparable claim to "we got here before you" style legitimacy can be made for Northern Protestants. Medieval Ulster was long known as the renegade province, and the *Tain Bo Cuilgne* is the central narrative text for this understanding, with its tale of the mighty Cu Chulain defending Ulster from the invaders from Connaught. These narratives, though, are not defining for Protestant Unionists, since they are still much too steeped in a *Gaelic* identity, which would go against their essentially Anglo-Saxon national mythology.

Nairn's sympathies lie not with traditional republicanism but with the hopes for an independent government for Northern Ireland. While this constitutes a radical re-thinking of the meaning of both sovereignty and nationhood, the argument is framed in a rather reactionary fashion. He seeks to legitimize this claim for sovereignty in large part through the tiresome scare-tactic (employed more by the right than the left) of condemning the Republic for being reactionary and oppressively Catholic. In insisting on the reality of Ulster nationalism, he sums up his assessment of the Republic by writing that "[t]o say this is not to deny that nationalism itself poses problems, as a solution. The first 40 years of the Republic's independence demonstrated only too clearly what these may be" (246). This poses first and foremost a problem of historical detail: "The

Republic" was declared in 1949 and *The Break Up of Britain* was written in 1981, so 40 years had not yet elapsed. Presumably Nairn is referring to the first forty years of *Irish* independence, or the first 32 years of "the Republic's independence," which leaves aside the question of the effect that lingering British control had on life in the *Free State of Ireland*. Presumably this reference to the early days of independence also does not mean the Free State/Republic's unyielding neutrality in international matters (which included a foreign policy that, unlike that of their neighbors in the United Kingdom, frequently went against the interests of United States), their active role in peacekeeping outside the nation's borders, and the establishment, almost from the ground up, of a welfare state very much the equal of any European or North American country. Kiberd addresses this kind of simplification when he writes that "[i]t would hardly be too much to say that the Irish, despite their reputation, are one of the least conservative people of Europe, to judge by the rate at which they have changed over the past century and a half" (1995:645-6). To be sure there are reactionary elements of contemporary Republicanism that Unionist Protestants have reason to fear, but Nairn's painting of the Republic as an unenlightened, hyper-nationalist purgatory with greedy designs on the territory of the besieged Ulstermen is both historically myopic and xenophobic. Despite these obvious shortcomings, *The Break-up of Britain* remains very much the primary text on the future (or lack thereof) of the Union, and has allowed many on the liberal left to justify their arguably neo-colonial fears of the "backward" and "underdeveloped" Irish as enlightened appeals to the benevolence of the "modern" British state.

Richard Kearney is also skeptical of traditional republicanism, and he also attempts to radically re-define nationhood and sovereignty, although he does so in a more historically

informed and nuanced fashion. One of his primary tasks is to recover the term "Republican" as someone who favors a political configuration that centralizes ideas such as autonomy, enlightenment ideals of rationality, and internationalism. He sums up his project as follows:

> There is a battle to be fought over the meaning of the term "republicanism" for Irish citizens in the emerging Europe. Waging this debate means confronting the following questions: Is the term so tainted by the campaign of IRA violence in Ulster as to stand unredeemed and unredeemable? Has it degenerated irreversibly into the adversarial extremes of sectarian nationalism and loyalism? Or is there still something to be retrieved from the United Irishmen's initial vision of a non-sectarian, cosmopolitan and enlightened republic of liberty and tolerance? (37)

As will be discussed at greater length in chapter two, Kearney's concept of republicanism fulfills much of the promise of both anti-colonialism so precious to both early and many (although certainly not all) contemporary Irish republicans and an insistence on local control so important to many Unionists and to people concerned about the survival of distinct cultures in both a united Ireland and a united Europe.

Also of central concern in enunciating a postcolonial identity, of course, is the question of women's role in the idealized national life. Given that Irish nationalism is so caught up with Catholicism, the role of women has been especially problematic in much anti-colonial rhetoric. The formation of a coherent feminist movement, both in N.I. and in the Republic, has had a great deal of urgency over the last few decades, and the concerns raised by some of those organizers are central to the films discussed in this essay. The image of "Mother Ireland," like "Mother India," has been marshaled as an anti-colonial tool but has also been castigated by many feminists as placing an undue burden on women at the same time that it renders them passive. Both *High Boot Benny* and *December Bride* seek to revisit and revise this double bind, although (as discussed

later) the former film does so in a much more questionable way than the latter. Further, the structure of the heterosexual family, with men as the heads of household and women responsible for the rearing of children, was literally institutionalized in Éamon de Valera's constitution of 1937.[6] Many see this document as institutionalizing a heavily Catholic-influenced and patriarchal social ideal, although it also officially laid claim to what is now N.I. Oppressive and anti-pluralist this document may have been, it was absolutely crucial in shoring up emerging or embattled (as in N.I.) notions of national Irish selfhood. Indeed, Geraldine Meany has written how ideas of the nation are caught up with the kinds of ideas put forth in the 1937 constitution, writing that "[t]he identification of the family (rather than, for example, the individual) as the basic building block of society is more than pious rhetoric in the Irish Constitution. In post-colonial southern Ireland a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it meant to be Irish" (233). Within the context of the self-determination that Irish anti-colonialists seek, the question of what it is to be determined by whom becomes a difficult and contradictory question. "Women... become guarantors of their men's status, bearers of national honor and the scapegoats of national identity," Meany writes. "They are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation. They become the territory over which power is exercised.... it is arguable that any form of national identity must constitute itself as power over a territory defined as feminine" (233).

The flip side of this oppressive relationship between Irish nationalism and gender is the possibility for women to take some agency that the centralization that maternal

images create. Writing on the women's movement in N.I., Monica McWilliams notes that

> an identification with the Irish culture and the Irish language is beginning to take root amongst a group of feminists in Belfast and within this, they argue, there is room for different Irish mythological images of the Great Mothers of our culture — images of mothers as warriors, clever, imaginative, strong, cunning, wise and compassionate. (84)

This strategy goes beyond a kind of Benjaminian "reading against the grain," and is instead an attempt to argue that certain texts and traditions are not inherently or objectively oppressive but have been misused in that way.

This brief survey of theoretical positions on Irish postcolonialism is, of course, incomplete, although it does give a general idea of some of the issues relevant in trying to figure out in what way these films by Comerford and O'Sullivan enunciate a postcolonial idea. As almost all of these thinkers point out, the term "postcolonial" is too easily appropriated for uses for which it is arguably not suited. Nevertheless, the ways that this concept has been worked out and gradually changed over the past few years points to the fact that the whole concept of Irish postcolonialism, like much of the postcolonial culture itself, is a work in progress, very much the subject of vigorous argument and negotiation that this not likely to be definitively settled anytime soon.

The Idea of a National Cinema

This essay deals with two filmmakers who have arguably been central in the development of a national cinema in Ireland. However, the very phrase "a national cinema in Ireland" presents difficulties which are both unique to that island and indicative of broader cultural debates about nationalism, culture, and the interaction between the

two. Andrew Higson has broadly outlined the ways in which national cinemas tend to be understood, and the way that the specific films discussed in this essay and Irish cinema as a set of institutions both embody and reject these categories sheds light on just how exceptional Irish cinema has been over the last twenty years or so. These kinds of arguments also suggest certain literary parallels, and it is important to understand how the question of "national cinema" differs from questions around "national literatures." A cinematic infrastructure of Ireland is not really on-line in the same way that it is in most western European countries, and the films of Comerford and O'Sullivan, less than reflections of a settled cinematic tradition, serve as interventions in a set of arguments that are quite unresolved.

Before discussing the national cinema of Ireland, it is necessary to lay out some basic terminology. First and foremost is to give a working definition of "hollywood," which will be used in this essay with a lowercase "h." Far from being a mere typographical error, this lowercase "h" is meant to signify the non-geographical nature of hollywood cinema. When film scholars discuss "Classical Hollywood Cinema" they are not necessarily discussing films made in Hollywood, California in a given era. Rather, it is a reference to an industrial mode of film production, which is generally marked by a style that is defined by not calling attention to itself and by a single-minded narrative drive forward. The industrial nature of the production, as distinct from an artisanal film practice, is also a characterizing feature of hollywood cinema. It is possible (indeed, accurate), to speak of a hollywood cinema existing not only in the United States, but in Canada (with films like *Meatballs*, or *Margaret's Museum*), Québec (with the comedy *La florida*) the United Kingdom (with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*), Egypt (with its

significant tradition of cinematic melodrama) or Ireland (with *The Crying Game* or, as discussed below, *The Commitments* or *My Left Foot*). This kind of industrial framework, especially in a now irreparably globalized economy, has a basic requirement subsuming of national differences whenever possible, so that a film may be integrated into a variety of foreign markets.

The idea of a "national cinema" is quite different, however, and the definition of this terms, has been the subject of endless debate. Phillip French, in an essay called "Is there a European Cinema?" provides a pithy differentiation between a "cinema" and a "film industry." "A film industry is the totality of resources for the production of theatrical movies," such as studios and technicians. "A cinema, on the other hand, is the tradition of movie making associated with a place or area, a body of work expressing, directly and obliquely, the spirit of its inhabitants, their character, aspirations, hopes and anxieties" (35). While this is a useful and pithy differentiation, Andrew Higson has written at greater length on the ambiguous term that is "national cinema," and has identified four very different ways in which the concept is generally understood. The way that these four understandings all apply to and yet fall short of defining the Irish situation points to just how difficult the defining of a national culture of any kind has been in Ireland.

Indeed, the project of defining a "national" culture *anywhere* is a difficult one, and it would be simplistic to rely on an unambiguous binary between a "national cinema" (which is authentically Irish or Dutch or Luxembourgian and therefore good) and a "hollywood cinema" (which is transnational and reductive and therefore colonizing and bad). What this examination of the ways that national cinema has generally been understood (*pace* Higson) is meant to do is show that most films that are made in or about

Ireland don't fully fit into any of the models he describes. There is a hollywood cinema at work (embodied by *Into the West*), a semi-propagandistic nationalist cinema (embodied by *Mise Éire*, discussed below) and an art cinema that falls somewhere in-between (of which the films of O'Sullivan and Comerford serve as good examples), to say nothing of less classifiable cinematic manifestations (such as the television serial *The Riordans*, also discussed below). None of these films are less "authentically Irish" than another, but these modes of production are rooted in very different political, economic and material conditions both inside and outside Ireland. Distinguishing between such modes of production, while not meant to make a moral point, can serve as a critical starting point (although certainly not as an end in itself).

Higson starts off by stating that "there is the possibility of defining national cinema in economic terms, establishing a cultural correspondence between the terms 'national cinema' and 'the domestic film industry,' and therefore being concerned with such questions as: 'where are these films made, and by whom?'" (36). Rockett addresses these questions in a brief article about cinema and Ireland, writing that

> only one of these films (*My Left Foot*) has an Irish director (Jim Sheridan), and with the exception of part of the funding for that film, finance for all the others [*The Commitments*, *My Left Foot*, *Hear My Song*, *Far and Away*] came from non-Irish sources.... Does it necessarily follow that because a film is made by an Irish filmmaker with Irish money, its representation of Ireland will be any more astute or authentic than that by a non-Irish filmmaker? (1992:26)

Rockett clearly does not believe that the kinds of questions posed by Higson's first "way of seeing" a national cinema has a great deal to offer those seeking an understanding of Irish film. Nevertheless, the question of financing and the national identity of the director inevitably play a role in determining whether a film is part of a national cinema. Rockett

seems to consider Gilles MacKinnon's *The Playboys* (1992) a part of Irish cinema (he praises it for its historical specificity and its subversion of stereotypes) even though, as he points out, it is "directed by a Scot, financed by Americans, and co-written by an Irishman" (1992:26). He contrasts this to other more clearly "Irish" films such as *The Commitments* (1991) and *My Left Foot* (1989), writing that

> what separates productions such as *The Commitments* (and that other acclaimed film about a 'debilitated' and backward Dublin, *My Left Foot*) from indigenous productions is that as a result of depending for finance on sources outside Ireland, crucial decisions about form and content have often been taken from Irish film-makers control. (1992:29)

This vision, then, relies less on Higson's questions about 'where are these films made, and by whom?" than on a third question: who is paying for them, and are they doing so because they hope to makes large amounts of money and be part of an essentially corporate economic landscape? This is not a question irrelevant to the content, or the form, of a given film. Janet Wasko documents in her book *Movies and Money* the transformation of the muckraking B-film *Red Meat* into the utterly apolitical *I Loved a Woman* (1933) because Warner Brothers feared offending Armour Meat Inc. (94-95). While this is certainly not the most representative case, it does point to the interconnectedness of finance and content. While it is not a given that an Irish filmmaker would make "crucial decisions about form and content" that are somehow more politically progressive or more "Irish," if those decisions are indeed made by a non-Irish person, that institutional fact, following Higson's economic model for understanding or identifying a national cinema, would need to be taken into consideration.

This focus on monetary matters, however, is especially complex in the context of Irish cinema. Financially speaking, Ireland's local, independent film community has been able

to survive on a sustainable basis because of the availability of pan-European funds from organizations like MEDIA or L'Espace Video Européen (which until recently was headquartered at Dublin's Irish Film Center). Almost all EU funding programs, however, require that some of the films financing come from a member state outside of the country of origin. Unsurprisingly, this has lead to free-floating anxiety among filmmakers that Irish content will be diluted so that Dutch audiences (to choose a random possibility) will be able to follow along. Martin McLoone has specifically addressed Irish cinema in the shadow of European unification, writing that "a brief survey of Irish cultural nationalism would seem to demonstrate the inherent danger in the nationalist project, the danger of an essentialist definition of cultural identity which is stifling in its narrowness and oppressive in its lack of generosity... And yet, the Irish experience also clearly shows the repressive and suffocating tendencies of dominant, metropolitan culture," such as that of a unified Europe (152). A government Green Paper on broadcasting policy also raises this idea of critical regionalism, asking if "we can break the cycle of cultural dependency endemic to many post-colonial societies..., will we be able to inject Irish cultural production with a critical regional self-confidence, secure in its identity in a peripheral nation, that contributes to the promise of a European audiovisual space that is not bland, monolithic and claustrophobic?" (136). For while EU-sponsored programs have provided much needed funding for Irish film and television, the fear of Irish cinema being defined by a kind of "Euro-pudding" ethic is a cause for anxiety. On the other hand, insularity and nationalism promises equal if not greater difficulty, and in the case of modern Ireland the search for a Celtic ideal is still a little too close to de Valera era repression to arouse much support. Who pays for what and what effect that might have on the content are

constant concerns, probably unresolvable given what would likely happen to film production in Ireland in the absence of co-productions.

Rockett's championing of *The Playboys*, however, is actually closer to Higson's second approach to a national cinema, "a text based approach. Here the key questions become: what are these films about? Do they share a common style or world view? What sort of projections of the national character do they offer?" (36). What appeals most to Rockett about *The Playboys* is the way that it, in contrast to *The Commitments*, brings the political contradictions of modern Irish life to the forefront, rather than sentimentally glossing over them. This approach, one would think, would also locate the films discussed in this essay squarely within an Irish national cinema, given their obsession with local issues. This becomes problematic, however, when a film challenges received notions of nationhood, as do almost all of the films of Comerford and O'Sullivan. Higson invokes Susan Barrowclough's assessment of Québec filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, asking of films in a national cinema "[t]o what extent are they engaged in '*exploring*, *questioning*, and constructing a notion of nationhood in the films themselves and in the consciousness of the viewer?'" (36, emphasis mine). Most of the films discussed in this essay do very little to construct an idea of nationhood, but they are very much engaged in exploring and questioning such ideas. A consideration of local (perhaps national) identity, then, is what a text based approach to national cinema looks for, as opposed to the presence or absence of simple (sometimes propagandistic) affirmations of the identity of *le peuple* or *An Phoblacht*.

This text-based approach is certainly no more "accurate" or better for finding a "true" Irish cinema than an economic one, and like the economic analysis, it allows for a fair bit

of arguability as to what constitutes part of the national cinema. Using a text-based approach, it could be argued that *The Commitments* constitutes a part of the national cinema by virtue of its focus on working class Dubliners, and this argument could be much harder to make using an economic approach, given the large amount of British and American money in the film. Then again, a text-based approach might exclude a film like O'Sullivan's *A Pint of Plain*, given its London setting and indebtedness to British "Kitchen Sink" realism, where an economic approach would argue that the film, by virtue of it being paid for by backers in Ireland and directed by O'Sullivan, is certainly part of the national cinema. A textual approach helps to organize meaning across a large body of films, but it should not be understood as any more "correct" by virtue of its focus on "the film itself" and how it portrays or does not portray Ireland.

Higson's third approach returns to the realm of the economic, as he writes of "the possibility of an exhibition-led, or consumption-based approach to national cinema. Here the major concern has always been to do with the question of which films audiences are watching, and particularly the number of foreign, and usually American films which have high-profile distribution within a particular nation-state — a concern which is generally formulated in terms of an anxiety about cultural imperialism" (37). This kind of imperialism was a hallmark of most of the silent and sound era in Ireland: since so little film was produced locally, most of the films on the nation's screens were American. Rockett notes that "[b]y 1922 Hollywood had become such a dominant force in world cinema that it has never been seriously challenged.... By then [1928, when some countries began to introduce projectionist legislation] the Irish situation was similar to that in Britain: about 90 percent of the films on release were American" (1987:39). This kind of

imperialism, however, was met in Ireland by a different, although arguably just as repressive, form of control: church-sponsored censorship. Rockett recalls that "[a]s American and English sound film became the norm in Ireland's cinemas in the early 1980s, the church intensified its anti-cinema campaign, a development which mirrored other countries" (51). The Irish experience of cultural imperialism, then, is not one of invasion followed by resistance followed by the liberation of a national cinema. Rather, exhibition in Ireland has both mirrored and opposed various forces of domination simultaneously, and this indeed is something of a microcosm for the entire country. The Catholic Church, after all, and the collective identity that it provided, was used by anti-colonialists to resist "the outsiders" and eventually form a non-colonized state. The Church didn't just go away when liberation was achieved, however, and as illustrated by the way that Ireland's national cinema as reflected by exhibition evolved, the Catholic Church has been in equal parts an institution of liberation and of repression.

Finally, Higson describes a "criticism-led approach to national cinema, which tends to reduce national cinema to the terms of a high-quality art cinema... rather than one which appeals to the desires and fantasies of the popular audiences" (37). While there has been practically nothing in the way of indigenous popular film that could speak to Irish desires and fantasies, local produced television has gone some way in filling this cinematic[7] gap. Gibbons has noted that

> The inauguration of the new television service on 31 December 1961 took place against a backdrop of immense social change in Ireland... membership of the United Nations (1956), the application for membership of the EEC (1961), and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) were seen by many as ushering in a welcome, outward looking attitude in Irish life. Television played a major part in bringing the effects of these 'global' initiatives into the living rooms of Irish people, thus clearing

> away many of the cultural cobwebs which had accumulated since the founding of the state. (1996:77)

He cites especially the long running serial *The Riordans*, the innovative style of which "had contributed a type of documentary realism to the action which helped it to investigate topical social issues, releasing television from the studio-bound approach which had dominated it up to then" (1997:78). Television melodrama, then, plays an especially important role in tracing Ireland's somewhat unusual trek towards modernity, in addition to setting some aesthetic standards (such as an emphasis on documentary realism) that would influence independent filmmakers (such as Comerford and O'Sullivan). Higson's "criticism oriented" approach would miss this essentially popular/vulgar form of expression and, as a result, would miss a great deal about the culture as a whole. While it would appear that Ireland's national cinema is easily isolatable to independent filmmakers such as Comerford and O'Sullivan, who make low budget and formally innovative work easily catagorizable as "art cinema," this has not evolved in a vacuum.

The distinction between national cinema and hollywood cinema, then, has a similar ring to arguments about the difference between "World Literature" and "National Literatures," but is different in important ways. The literary distinction generally focuses on whether a work, as Horst Steinmetz writes, "concerns itself with regionally or otherwise limited subject matters, problems and perspectives, and thus moves away from the 'world appeal' of world literature" (132).

Comerford has, with limited success, attempted to steer his film *High Boot Benny* away from a local/national cinema context and into a transcendent/world cinema context.

There was a small firestorm over *High Boot Benny* in the Irish film community, started in part by statements at the Dublin Film Festival made by Henri Rosenblatt (head of SCALE, a Lisbon-based EU media funding consortium). During a post-film question and answer session, Rosenblatt claimed that "while it [*High Boot Benny*] has got some strong political resonance for Irish viewers, it could have been made in Poland or many other places. It is an allegory about hate, violence and communities." Comerford, in responding to this statement, has said that "I would feel happy with 'allegory' as a description" (both quoted in Mac Reamoinn, 11). Many commentators noted that this allegorical description allowed the film to fit within the comfortable environment of the transnational European art film (the kind that SCALE would help finance and which is not so different from an idea of "World Literature"). Kevin Maher angrily responded that "[t]he film's closing credits roll and the Henri Rosenblatts of this world nervously grope about for some pat and pithy clichés about Art and allegories, while bemused film critics search for historical resonance. Yet, at the end of the day, *Benny* fails, not because it is a piece of Art . . . but because it is Comerford's most explicitly political work to date, rendered impotent by its own introspective, insular nature" (26). Much of the controversy around the film centered around this international/local split, with many debates back and forth about whether or not the film was really "about" N.I. A similar argument could be had about *December Bride* and whether it is a film centrally about local issues that require specialized knowledge (rural Irish Protestant communities at the turn of the century) or larger issues that transcend its national origins (such as the role of women in family life, individual liberty, or the question of whether one can be totally loyal to more than one mate).

While nobody but the most isolationist nationalist would suggest that a film must be incomprehensible to "outsiders" in order to be "truly Irish," the erasure of the (sometimes very complex) political and historical reality that surrounds a film like *High Boot Benny* certainly has a political subtext given that it is made by a filmmaker trying for a wide audience (which would be necessary to make back a significant investment) and support from funding agencies who are notoriously phobic of explicitly political work. Comerford does not acknowledge this subtext when discussing the film's "transcendent" quality, and so leaves himself open to charges of distortion. Further, being part of a "national cinema" does not mean that a text is inaccessible to those who are not intimately acquainted with a nation's history and politics, although a text-based approach to national cinema (clearly one not followed by Comerford or Rosenblatt — which is not to say that they are somehow lesser filmmakers or administrators because of it) would centralize some sense of regional specificity when trying to make sense of a film.

Further, while hollywood has certainly become a global form and, in depending heavily on foreign markets, most definitely has a "world appeal," this appeal has a specifically economic rationale, having little to do with the attention to a broad range of shared human concerns that is supposed to characterize "world literature." While much ink has been spilled in debates over the definition of "world literature," these do not translate so well into cinematic terms. Capital is king in both Hollywood and hollywood. This is not, of course, an irrelevant concern in discussion about "world literature." Claus Clüver, criticizing Steinmetz's definition of "world literature," notes that "[t]he label also necessarily applies to a set of institutional practices involved with the processes of production, distribution, and consumption" (135). These concerns, however, far from

being an "also" or an aside, as they are in Clüver's response, are unambiguously central in the distinction between a hollywood cinema and a national cinema. It is this heavy dose of economic reality into cultural endeavors that will, indeed, haunt the development of a national cinema in Ireland.

Theoretical issues surrounding hegemony and normalization are also of central importance because until quite recently, there was simply was (almost) no indigenous Irish filmmaking. Ireland is quite unique in western Europe in the degree to which images of the place were made almost entirely by outsiders. The silent period was marked by some locally controlled production by the American company Kalem in the teens, and also by the establishment of the Film Company of Ireland in 1916 (just a month before the Easter Rising) and the independent production of the War of Independence epic *Irish Destiny* (1925). The early sound period also saw some very limited independent filmmaking, and while the films enjoyed modest domestic financial success, the failed to lay the groundwork for an indigenous industry. Kevin Rockett sums up the situation when he writes that

> by the end of the 1930s Irish fiction film produced by private individuals remained periodic and intermittent. The absence of any organized means of learning about film-making in Ireland was a crucial hindrance to the development of a native industry.... No private concern showed any serious willingness to invest the sums required for an indigenous film industry which could produce films for distribution abroad.... Thus lay and religious commentators interested in promoting a native film industry, looked to the state to establish one. However much the state may have desired an Irish film industry it showed a marked reluctance to enter this unpredictable business and was more concerned in the first instance with satisfying its own informational needs. (68-69)

Indeed, this middle period of Irish filmmaking is dominated by very dry documentary/informational films that often served as campaign platforms. The most

famous examples of this are Fianna Fàil's propaganda film *A Nation Once Again* (1946) and the response by Clann na Poblachta (a small opposition party) *Our Country?* (1948), which harshly criticized the Fianna Fàil government through a very odd (and perhaps distinctly Irish) mixture of almost socialist anger at disparities in wealth and an extremely conservative appeal to traditional values as a solution. 1959 and 60 saw the production of George Mossion's two widely seen historical documentaries *Mise Éire* (I Am Ireland, 1959) and *Saoirse?* (Freedom?, 1960). Both of these were compilations of old newsreel and amateur footage, the first beginning in 1907 and ending with the electoral victory of Sinn Féin in 1918, and the second covering the period of the War of Independence until the Civil War (1919 to about 1922). Both are arguably romantically nationalist, chronicling the birth of the Irish nation through the blood sacrifice of anti-colonial, anti-British struggle. These films were not widely seen outside of Ireland, as the voice-over narration was entirely in Irish and were not allowed by the producers to be subtitled (giving the films an added nationalist zing).[8]

One of the attempts in the 1950s to stimulate indigenous film production was the government-funded construction of Ardmore Studios. Established in 1958, it represents a very odd combination of cultural and economic aspirations that are in many ways a cautionary tale for those seeking to build a national cinema. The studios were opened with a combination of private and public money, and their first few projects were adaptations of Abbey Theater productions. The project was supported by Sean Lemass, who was at that time Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and head of the Department of Industry and Commerce, and who would soon become Taoiseach (Prime Minister). Rockett notes that "in his opening address on 12 May 1958, Lemass emphasized the

employment and export, rather than the cultural, value of the studios" (1988:99). Ardmore was racked by financial difficulties of all kinds, which did not endear it to the interests who would support its huge budget. The studios also alienated much of the Irish film community, who came to see it as an elitist institution wishing it was part of hollywood and more interested in attracting foreign talent that nurturing a national cinema. Rockett, in his *Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, writes that "[t]he use of state funds to subsidize Ardmore while under state ownership during 1975-1982 was a major target for the campaign for an indigenous Irish cinema by independent filmmakers, which led to the setting up of the Irish Film Board" (1997:21).

The setting up of this film board has been a turning point in establishing a sustainable Irish film infrastructure, although the process has been difficult for all concerned. The Irish Film Board or Bord Scannán na hÉireann (hereafter BSÉ), and its recent history has been marked by attempts to juggle the conflicting demands placed on national film bodies. It was founded in 1983 but de-activated in 1987 after many of its projects failed to return much in the way of profits. Rockett, Gibbons and Hill offer another explanation, writing in *Cinema and Ireland* that "while the Taoiseach [at that time Charlie Haughey] emphasized the apparent financial failure of the Irish Film Board as the reason for its closure, it may also have been the case that many of the films financially aided by the board were perceived as undermining the image of contemporary Ireland which the state wanted to project" (274). While there is certainly much to be said for this explanation (the Board refused to distribute several films that it had provided pre-production funds for), what it points to is the BSÉ's inability to see film as having

inherent cultural value, quite apart from the economic impact of employed technicians or making people at Bord Fáilte (the tourist board) happy.

The BSÉ's reactivation came in 1993, and it flourished under the guidance of the Minster of Culture and the Gaeltacht[9] Michael Higgins, whose support for Irish film is well known (with the fall of the Fine Gael coalition in 1997, Higgins has been replaced by Síle deValera, niece of Éamon). This reactivation came with certain assumptions re-arranged, one of which was the inherently economic/hollywood nature of such funding efforts. The BSÉ has supported, in addition to internationally known filmmakers like Neil Jordan, a wide variety of short film and documentary work, much of which has little (if any) economic potential. In addition to films by Comerford, O'Sullivan and Jordan, they have supported films in N.I. (such as the experimental historical drama *Anne Devlin* [Pat Murphy, 1984]), documentaries (such as Cathal Black's indictment of the Christian Brothers *Our Boys* [1986], a film which RTÉ refused to show and the BSÉ declined to distribute), features and featurettes by Bob Quinn (who served as a mentor for Black, O'Sullivan and Comeford), student shorts, and assorted low budget projects (some feature length, some shorter) which often wound up on RTÉ or in European film festivals. These funding policies go hand in hand with ongoing and multifaceted consolidation of national *culture*. It's no surprise, then, that the BSÉ falls into the portfolio of the minister in charge of the Gaeltacht. BSÉ and Bord na Gaeltachta (BnaG) have as their common mission the protection of an indigenous Irish culture from the slings and arrows of (often English language) cultural imperialism. BnaG is not expected to turn a profit, and the realization that this is also an unrealistic expectation for BSÉ has been stabilizing factor for the Board. Indeed, the shift from an industrial to a cultural framework is a big part of

the second incarnation of the BSÉ, and it has been no small part of the reason that a local cinema now has something of a foothold in the Republic.

Conclusion

This very brief introduction seeks to sketch out some basic ideas important in discussing the cinema of Ireland. While the films discussed in the body of this essay do not always embody easily agreed upon concepts of "national cinema" or "postcolonialism," they do all show just how slippery these terms can be in an Irish context. Comerford and O'Sullivan are filmmakers of central importance to Ireland, and to world cinema as whole, not so much for what their films say about Irish culture, but for what they fail to say. They seek to radically revise much of what has been outlined here, and the ways in which they set about that task, and indeed sometimes fail in what they seem to set out to do, speaks volumes about the paradoxes of modern Irish culture.

Chapter 1: Joe Comerford and the Pitfalls of Nationalism

The work of Joe Comerford has as its primary project to challenge mainstream, reductive ideas about Irish selfhood. His films veer between the sectarian and the radical, but his *oeuvre* has done much to re-orient the cinematic portrayal of Ireland. All of his films are made in a assertively anti-romantic style, and put alongside the images of Ireland that had filled film screens until the 1960s, this brutality has the potential for forceful anti-colonial energy (although the potential for nationalist simplifacation is also ever present). Indeed, the way that he uses the Irish landscape is especially important, as his visual style is concerned not with traditional norms of beauty, or with the project of making the Irish land look rugged and harsh: instead, the way that he understands landscape is as something that is unstable with connotations of danger and anxiety. Further, his work is explicitly concerned with those on the margins (who could in some cases be considered colonized by the post-colonial state): he has made films about drug addicts, the desperately poor of Dublin, traveling people, gay men, criminals, and hunted teenagers. This has the effect of radically breaking down essentialist ideas of *fíor ghael* (the pure gael). Comerford's image of Ireland, then, is a radical challenge to the myth of the "Celtic Tiger" or "The New Ireland." In addition to addressing this kind of internal oppression, Comerford has also dealt with the ongoing British occupation of Northern Ireland, and his films that deal with this operate in a way fairly categorized as sectarian and reactionary. The work of Joe Comerford, then, raises many important questions about the way that Ireland is facing, and representing, its supposedly post-colonial future, and the place that the wretched of Ireland (to borrow a term from Frantz Fanon) will have in that future.

While a central aspect of a hollywood cinema is a tendency to subsume both formal innovation and explicit ideology under a cloak of realism, Comerford's films do not do this. Rather, they wear both their ideological commitments and their formal innovaton on their sleeves. Importantly, however, the political character of these films is hardly ever in keeping with the distortions of romantic nationalism (which often, as in some of the campaign and historical documentaries mentioned in the introduction, also portray their ideological content as natural). What makes Comerford's films so unusual, so not part of a hollywood system, is not that they are confrontational or anti-authoritarian in their form or political positioning (although they are) but that they have formal or political positions at all. Comerford's films stand quite clearly outside of a hollywood system, and while their ideology is sometimes sectarian and their form sometimes in keeping with reactionary representations, they *always* stand outside this system because they make their quality as ideoligcally motivated representations clear, as opposed to presenting themselves as hollywood-style realism.

***Down the Corner* (1978)**

The look of *Down the Corner* cues the viewer immediately that this is to be a bleak, harsh vision. The film was shot on 16mm rather than the commerical standard of 35mm, and rather than seeking to hide that stock's inherent graininess and shallow focus, Comerford uses this "dirtyness" in a way that contributes significantly to the film as a whole. The community that Comerford portrays here is racked with poverty, and is therefore portrayed with a similarly impoverished aesthetic. This question of impoverished aesthetics has been a central concern of the Third Cinema movement, and

that movement's impact can certainly be felt in all of Comerford's work, but most clearly in *Down the Corner* and, a few years later, *Traveler*. Further, the film was among the first indigenous Irish films that had as its explicit project to de-romanticize life within the Republic, and is therefore a central text in the understanding of the emergence of the national cinema. While *Down the Corner* is not as ambitious in terms of its subject matter as some of Comerford's later films (culminating in the nationalist rabble rouser *High Boot Benny*), it does set out many of the concerns that he would deal with throughout his career.

Comerford sets his film in Dublin, although it is a Dublin that few would recognize, and this rendering of the place as foreign is a big part of what gives the film its impact. The opening images are of a bleak urban landscape, full of decaying buildings and empty lots. The protagonists are two profane, ill-mannered young boys who are altogether unsympathetic. *Down the Corner* follows their everyday life in some detail, and a lot of time is spent hanging around, making trouble, and playing the occasional football game.

Completely absent from *Down the Corner* is any evidence of the supposed economic revitalization that Ireland was supposed to be undergoing in the late 1970s. These images, then, set out one of the film's central themes very early on: despite the insistence of those who would point to it as an "economic miracle," the Republic is just as dangerous, violent and impoverished as the North. *Down the Corner* has as its central project to debunk the myth that Ireland was, in the 1970s, well ensconced in a "post-colonial" phase, one where the problems associated with "third world" countries are now a thing of the past. Rather, as the images of the desolate cityscape illustrate (a cityscape which resembles war-torn Belfast with its abandoned, ruined buildings and ever-present threat

of violence), the film is very much about evoking the Republic as a place unable to shake off the remnants of a violent and economically underdeveloped past.

The fact that *Down the Corner* looks extremely low-budget is also very important. The film, indeed, made through the Balleyfarmont Community Arts Workshop (although with additional support from the British Film Institute), illustrates much of the idealism of the "third cinema" or "imperfect cinema" movements that took hold in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s. One of that movement's leading theorists, the Cuban Julio García Espinosa, writes in his manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema," that "[i]mperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or technique. It can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle. Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in predetermined taste, and much less in 'good' taste" (82). Indeed, conventional narrative and visual expectations remain mostly unfulfilled by *Down the Corner*. The protagonists, as mentioned before, are not meant to be very compelling. The backdrop of north Dublin is quite consciously portrayed as ugly and falling apart. The film itself is made on grainy, black and white stock. The dialogue is thickly accented, quickly spoken and often difficult for non-Dubliners to understand.[10] Rather than being a linear narrative shot and edited in classical style, the film has a preponderance of long takes mixed in with occasional *noir*-ish flashback sequences. In a way which Third Cinema theorists would no doubt approve of, *Down the Corner* feels like an extremely dreary mish-mash of neo-realism, documentary, and political filmmaking.

It does not, in short, look like much in the way of a foundational text of an Irish film industry, even if it had the potential to lay part of the framework for a post-colonial national cinema. Kevin Rockett has recalled that:

> An extreme example of the limited support given by the NFSI [National Film Studio of Ireland] to indigenous production was revealed in the letters page of *The Irish Times* in 1977. Joe Comerford's *Down the Corner*... received a concession of £10 per week off the renting of an editing bench at the studios. (1988:116)

The mission of the NFSI, like many similar national film organs, was not to promote the creation of a critical and semi-independent national cinema, but the creation of an economically viable industry. Most of Comerford's work, but especially *Down the Corner*, rejects these hollywood assumptions in both its form and its economic character, and was awarded an equivalent amount of support from the capitalist-oriented governing body. *Down the Corner*, then, is as important to Irish cinema as breakthrough films like Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* and Neil Jordan's *Angel*, but for very different reasons. *Down the Corner*, along with the first films of Thaddeus O'Sullivan (discussed in Chapter 2) and Bob Quinn, represented an extremely low-budget and extremely local imagining of the national cinema, one which could stand as a counterpoint, and in many ways a corrective, to the internationalized (and arguably hollywood-ized) version of Irish film.[11]

Down the Corner, then, signaled that Joe Comerford would be an important, if not exactly conventional, figure in an emergent Irish national cinema. The film deals with the marginalized of Dublin and does so through an aesthetic that mirrors their maginalization, so its less-than-central place in the national film culture is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the film in many ways illustrates the ideals of post-colonial cinema

practice, and is for that reason an important starting point in the development of an Irish national cinema that could include films that did not necessarily fit into a capitalist framework. It laid out, in a tentative form, the concerns that would pre-occupy Comerford throughout his career, and the concerns, both political and formal, that would define Irish cinema as it would struggle to emerge from the shadow of hollywood.

***Traveler* (1982)**

Comerford's first feature film continued his interest in marginalized figures, by portraying the difficulties faced by those known loosely as "The Travelers." The film displays a characteristic mix of the visceral and the critical, and is in equal parts a melodrama and a political intervention. Filmed on a very low budget, *Traveler*'s visuals are grainy, rough-looking, and feature many unbalanced and unsteady compositions. Appropriately, then, the film uses the Irish landscape in a most arresting manner, making the country appear bleak, barren, and made up of nothing but extremely narrow and confusing roads. His subject are people who are the most marginalized and least discussed ethnic group in Ireland, the Travelers, and he portrays their daily lives with a detail and brutality that is unequaled in Irish cinema before or since. The film's narrative also features a foray into Northern Ireland, a journey that further disrupts the construction of Ireland as a safe, modernized and thriving place, although in a way much different than most films that deal with the region. The film also, like much of Comerford's work, seeks to disrupt conventional notions of "family values" by portraying familial relations as the locus of, not the escape from, fear and violence. *Traveler*, then, fits quite well into the themes that Comerford had been developing throughout his (at that time short) career.

The narrative of the film revolves around the quest of two members of a traveling community, Angela and Michael, to go into N.I. and smuggle down televisions to sell clandestinely in the Republic. Andrea and Michael are the subjects of a marriage arranged by Andrea's father, who is seen to be a violent, repressed man. It is revealed midway through the film that Angela had been the victim of incestuous attacks by her father when she was a child, and she was indeed confined to an orphanage as a result of this (she was blamed for her father's injury when during such an assault she smashed a bottle over his head). Comerford eventually moves his narrative to encompass both sides of the Irish border, and this, as Rockett notes, is "itself a rare journey for Southern [as in from the Republic] filmmakers" (132), although the way that he uses this narrative elements has an unexpected effect. The result of the foray to the North, is that Angela ultimately decides to emigrate to Britian[12] with her newfound lover (who was for a time in on the TV stealing scheme), not to harden her nationalist or anti-U.K. feelings.

Like the look of *Down the Corner*, the visual feel of *Traveler* contributes to its portrayal of the desperately poor and disenfranchised. Comerford has again used an "imperfect cinema" aesthetic, shooting with a very grainy variety of 16mm stock, making his visuals look washed out and pale. Good taste, or conventional views of aesthetic "beauty" are left for the most part by the wayside, in favor of awkward compositions, jarring editing and a lot of shaky, hand-held camera work.

Further, he shows quite explicitly what kind of ill repair most of the Republic of Ireland's infrastructure was in, especially in the economically depressed late 70s and early 80s. This is a "road film" of sorts in that its narrative focuses on a journey, but Comerford's vision of the road is far from the open freedom that defines hollywood road

films. Rather, all of the roads we see in *Traveler* are incredibly narrow, bumpy, windy, and have a maze-like appearance. The image of "the road," after all, has a very different meaning for traveling communities, who live their entire lives by a kind of road movie ethic. Since the inherent brutality and violence of traveling communities is so central part of this film however, the claustrophobic way that the road is represented is entirely consistent with what it has come to mean to this community. In keeping with the Third Cinema idea, *Traveler* bypasses altogether conventions of mainstream cinematic aesthetics in favor of a look that is consistent with its subject matter. The film is also, like *Down the Corner*, shot with a preponderance of long takes, which links it aesthetically to documentary. Indeed, the one genre that *Traveler* is not visually linked with is the classical narrative film, even though it has the distinction of being Comerford's "first feature."

What Comerford accomplishes by making this first feature look so unlike classical norms of the narrative film is to de-stabilize the norms for the then-emergent Irish film industry. As discussed in the introduction, when the Republic began to develop a national cinema in the early 1980s, the policy surrounding that development leaned strongly towards the classical narrative film that could easily be integrated into a capitalist, globalized film market. *Traveler* is very much the product of these early attempts to shore up this kind of cinematic infrastructure, and as Rocket notes, the film was one of the first recipients of a script grant from the Arts Council of Ireland (1988:132). What Comerford's aesthetic represents in an institutional context, then (much more so than the British Film Institute funded *Down the Corner*) is an intervention, an attempt to link an emergent Irish film culture with other emergent post-

colonial cinemas, such as those of Latin America or Africa,[13] as opposed to the dominant but often inaccessible ideal of hollywood or European art cinemas.

Comerford's use of landscape in *Traveler* also stands in contradiction to prevailing norms of representation, both from within and without Ireland. Ireland has been historically represented as a non-urban, pre-industrial, rugged but beautiful paradise. Whereas Comerford simply cut around this stereotype in *Down the Corner* by dealing with the urban ghettos of Dublin, here he tackles it head on. *Traveler* does indeed represent Ireland as somewhere that is pre-industrial and essentially non-urban, but here that visualization is seen as the root of a desperate poverty, both economic and spiritual. The landscape in which this narrative unfolds is indeed pre-industrial, and a traveling community provides the perfect cast of characters for such imagery, but it is not populated by the hardworking farmers of de Valera era rhetoric. Rather, this rurality is seen as the place where a longing for the creature comforts of industrialized culture give rise to crime, violence and eventually death.

Another aspect of traditionalist imagery that Comerford shatters here is the sacred nature of family ties, a central aspect of de Valera era posturing. He explores this aspect of Irish culture gone awry in a much more explicit way than he does in *Down the Corner*, where he shows that family ties, dysfunctional though they may sometimes be, still provide much strength in difficult situations. *Traveler*, on the other hand, shows the violence that defies life in these traveling communities to be closely tied to the hierarchical family. This is made most explicit by the arranged marriage and the violent and repressed character of Andrea's father. It's clear that he's like this because of his hard and impoverished life, but Angela's father nevertheless serves as the locus of, as opposed

to the protector against, the violence inherent to the harsh life of travelers. The inherently patriarchal nature of the family is further emphasized by the complete (and unexplained) absence of Angela's mother. The incestuous attacks and mental institution confinement only reinforce this authoritarian portrait. Here, as opposed to some of Comerford's later films which deal with sexual anxiety (*High Boot Benny* in specific), the female character is seen to be the unambiguous victim of, as opposed to the dangerous semi-accomplice in, the dysfunctional direction that nationalist idealism has taken. Indeed, as Rockett notes, *Traveler* "has a deeper social importance through its depiction of the nature of the family and the potential for liberation" (132). The potential for liberation is seen in this film explicitly as an escape from what the family has created (the death of the father and a break with the arranged marriage), and that the nature of the family is seen as a contradiction to that potential.

In keeping with a re-figuring of the Irish political landscape, the film's Northern setting is not used for its visceral or melodramatic qualities, as it is in the now fully realized genre of the "Troubles Film," (which is discussed further in chapter 2) or as Comerford would himself later use in his film *High Boot Benny* (1993). Rather, Northern Ireland is used here to illustrate the inherently fragmented nature of the Irish experience, and this insight fits in quite organically with everything else that Comerford has shown about these communities. Angela's emigration to Britain re-enforces this fragmented portrait. For the characters in this film, Ireland is a deeply unstable and undesirable place, although for reasons that are utterly useless to nationalist or unionist political rhetoric. Comerford sidesteps the ideological or sectarian aspects of the British/Irish question, showing the debate over the status of partitioned Ireland to be not about identity but

simple economic survival. The Northern situation is troubling in a European context not only because it makes Europe seem totally warlike and dis-unified (which is what the kinder, gentler, post-WWII EU is exactly *not* supposed to be) but also because it flies in the face of the image of Ireland as an "economic miracle." Indeed, Jim Smyth's thesis about the essence of the Northern Ireland conflict is especially relevant in this context. He writes that "[w]hile a decade ago the Irish problem looked like an isolated revival of a conflict settled generations ago[14] it is now becoming apparent that Ireland and its conflict are part of a structural crisis of global capitalism" (33). Smyth sees the N.I. struggle less as a question of national identity as such than as part of a dissulution of economic superpowers (such as the British Empire) which has had violent results in many parts of the world (such as in Algeria and East Timor, just to choose two random examples). An economic or class based analysis as opposed to a nationalist rebellion is what lies at the center of *Traveler*, which understands the North's relationship with the Republic not in terms of republican idealism or romanticism about the Union, but in terms of where it is easiest to get cheap televisions and where it will be most lucrative to re-sell them.

All of this brutal, anti-romantic imagery stands in radical contrast to received imagery of Ireland. This reductionism was visible not only in colonial and pre-colonial rural stereotypes, but also in the then-emergent indigenous film and television cultures. Such representation was meant largely to assure its place in an evolving European community. This mainstream imagery was embodied by the transmission by RTÉ in 1982 (the same year *Traveler* was released) of the nostalgic film *The Ballroom Romance*, and the norms that this program established had an enormous impact on the emerging Irish image culture. Commenting on the program, Luke Gibbons has written that:

> Viewers could confront the harsh realities of poverty, emigration, sexual repression and the enforced domestication of women, secure in the knowledge that 'The factory was coming to town,' — a recurrent topic in conversations between characters in the play — which would make all these features of the old social order redundant. Such optimism, however, seems strangely at odds with the subsequent unfolding of events in the mid- and late- 1980s. The chronic unemployment, the Granard tragedy, the Kerry babies controversy, the demoralization in the aftermath of the divorce and abortion referenda, the growth of a new underclass, the reappearance of full-scale emigration, and the new censorship mentality and, not least, the moving statutes, constituted a return to the repressed for those intent on brining Ireland into the modern world. (83)

Comerford's first feature, like all of his work, is very much about this return of the repressed. His film stands in marked opposition to what Gibbons calls "the myth of modernization."[15] The considerations that Gibbons identifies — moral, cultural, political, religious and economic crises that have long been part of Ireland's (often violent) national narrative — are central considerations in all of his films, even if the local film culture that he helped to develop would only occasionally address them. This insistence on bringing the repressed to the surface will sometimes create problems for his films — these kinds of problems are most evident in *High Boot Benny* — but this political project is, despite its sectarian overtones, an extremely important part of the development of a local, non-hollywood Irish cinema.[16]

Traveler's overall project, then, like that of *Down the Corner*, is to de-romanticize Ireland, to show it not as an emergent paradise but as a dangerous, not-quite-post-colonial place. He does this by assaulting assumptions from across the political spectrum. His understanding of landscape, family relationships and national allegiances are all deeply fragmented, and do not fit easily into mainstream political discourse. His representation of both the North and the Republic shows that the experience of being Irish in a period so

economically and nationally unstable is not easily represented, and is best understood only as a series of ambiguities and frustrations.

***Reefer and the Model* (1988)**

Comerford's second feature film was the work that brought him the most significant amount of international exposure he had yet experienced.[17] Further, the film continues the evocation of modern Ireland as a fragmented, fractured place, one that fails to conform to nationalist idealism. Comerford accomplishes this less by narrative means than simply through the characters with which he populates the film: a former prostitute and drug addict, an IRA man more criminal than revolutionary and who is on the run from the law, and a gay man (still very much a taboo subject in Irish culture). This motley crew ends up, as some observers have noted, as a kind of surrogate family, and perhaps a microcosm for the nation itself, and it is a group which is eventually driven apart by the reactionary and oppressive elements of the dominant culture. Further, *Reefer and the Model* fails to conform to the narrative elements of the "heist film," a genre which it rather self-consciously echoes, and therefore further problematizes the project of creating narrative that is organic with the spirit of a fractured, unstable place. The film, while conventionally narrative in some parts, is a re-imagining, on both formal and political levels, of what it means to be Irish in an age where assumptions about identity have broken down.

Reefer and the Model has a cast of characters that make it clear that the film is set in an Ireland not found in either tourist literature or political tracts. Reefer is a small time hustler, hinted to have an IRA past, who now lives on his boat and barely ekes out a

living. The family into which he has integrated is comprised of himself, an IRA man on the run named Spider, and a gay man named Badger. Together they run a small trawler, hauling combinations of legal and illegal cargo. A young woman, whom Reefer picks up hitchhiking, is brought into their midst, and nicknamed "The Model." The Model is a former prostitute, a heroin addict, and pregnant. Further, she is from the Conamara islands, and as she mentions to Reefer, she is an Irish speaker. There is a lot of romanticism invested in the image of *an ghael na gConamara* (the Conamara gael),[18] and The Model, to say the least, is not a very good example of the rural, hardworking , salt-of-the earth people thought to inhabit the region. The first sign that their existence is starting to fall apart comes when Badger has sex with a soldier in the pub's bathroom, only to be discovered by the soldier's platoon-mates. After some sparring, they retreat to the boat, and decide to lay low for a while. When the trawler breaks down, the group decides that the only way to get the money for the repairs is to pull a bank heist, which, it is hinted, is something that the trio used to do quite regularly. The heist, as could be expected, goes wrong. Oddly, though, it all comes undone when the two gardai who the band had successfully eluded wreck their car. When the band returns to the crash site, Spider tries, unsuccessfully, to drown one of the badly injured pursuers. The sequence, embodied by this display of mean spirited and impotent violence, is decidedly different from the excitement of a hollywood-style heist. Spider and Badger are eventually captured, although Reefer escapes with the Model in the trawler, where he eventually drowns.

The opening sequence of the film sets up the de-stabilization that will define the film. The lead character, known only as Reefer, is driving with his mother, when they pick up a

young hitchhiker. Reefer and his mother spar briefly, she tells the hitchhiker (who nicknames her "The Model") that Reefer used to be someone she could be proud of. Reefer makes an offhanded remark how her politics were what got him in the state he is in now, and it becomes clear later that he is a former member of the IRA. Reefer is clearly a disappointment to his aging and somewhat prim mother, having tried and apparently failed to make good on the promises of violent uprising that defined her generation,[19] resigned now to a life of squalor and frustration. Spider is a similar vision of disillusionment, for although he is defined as an IRA man, he is seen here as a criminal, not a revolutionary (although he is wanted by the gardai,[20] it is never made clear what exactly the charge is). Badger's betrayal of conservative nationalist norms is self-evident in a nation as overwhelming Catholic as Ireland, and the bathroom sex sequence only solidifies this. The Model herself shatters a fair number of romantic notions about Irish identity, not the least of which is a traditional concern for the innocence and chastity of (especially unmarried) women.

But despite their anti-traditional makeup, this group at the center of *Reefer and the Model* ends up acting as a kind of family structure. Rockett, John Hill and Gibbons advance this reading, noting that "Comerford's earlier film, Traveler (1982), had implied a metaphorical relationship between the breakdown of the family and the social divisions within the North, *Reefer and the Model* attempts to construct an alternative 'family' of 'outsiders' which escapes the normal constraints of state and society" (1988, 272). In contrast to the damning vision of familial structures in *Traveler*, then, what *Reefer and the Model* in some ways constitutes is an idealistic fantasy about the possibilities of family. Indeed, writing about the film's tragic ending, Rockett, Hill and Gibbons note

that "this unholy family is, as the concluding song implies, no more than 'a dream', a self-consciously imaginary community which must collapse once the reality principle intervenes" (1988, 272). The way that these four stick together (getting in bar fights for each other, robbing banks together, getting chased down and captured side by side) is what finally acts as their undoing, and while they may be devoted to each other becasue of a lack of alternatives more than anything else, they nevertheless provide a knd of support network that helps to offset their shared marginal status.

The classification of the family as a *dream* and or an *imagined community* are especially important in understanding Comerford's semi-utopic project in *Reefer and the Model*. Surreal or dream-like imaginings of the family have long been used in Irish literature, and Joyce is perhaps the best known 20th century author to draw on this trope. Comerford's vision here is nothing like the gently melancholy vision of the national family in *Dubliners*, although it is also not as radically disjointed and fragmented as the family-like menagerie that forms the center of *Ulysses*. Further, it is important to remember that in *Traveler*, Comerford quite explicitly visualized family as a *nightmare*. On the other hand, many of the problems exposed in *Down the Corner* are related to the complete absence of familial (or state) structure: that corner of Dublin, Comerford shows, is rotting away because of the absence of any structure at all. Further, Rockett, Hill and Gibbons' invocation of the "imagined community" seems to hint at Benedict Anderson's text on nationalism *Imagined Communities*, and as in *Traveler* and *Down the Corner*, the link between nation and family is easy to make in *Reefer and the Model*. Comerford's dream of Irish selfhood, then, is here one based in heterogeneity, free of nationalist idealism and finally quite unstable. He shows that he knows all to well what can happen

when, as Rockett, Hill and Gibbons note, the structure fails to "escape the normal constraints of state and society" — it leads to death or imprisonment. Anderson, however, explaining the idea of nations as imagined communities, has noted that "the nation is 'an imagined political community'... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). This is explicitly not the case in Comerford's symbolic-nation, however, for all of its members do know each other, and are in constant contact (or, as Anderson might say, communion) with each other. Comerford's vision of family, then, and of nation, is here of an entity that is both small enough to be clearly understood (and therefore not imagined in the way a nation is) and yet also heterogeneous in a way that statist imagining of nationhood infrequently allows. It gives realization to the aspects of nationhood that Anderson identifies as desirable but ultimately impossible.

Reefer and the Model is also notable for the way that it simultaneously embraces and rejects the conventions of the hollywood "heist film." The way in which the supposedly climactic heist is seen to go wrong provides little of the visceral, violent catharsis associated with the hollywood genre. It is instead an awkward, frustrated confrontation, free of the heroics or even the tragedy of the criminal fighting for their lives. Instead, what Comerford evokes is a group of aging, aimless men trying to stay alive and finding out how complicated and painful that is considering the marginal existence that they collectively live out.

This issue of genre is commonplace in discussions of *Reefer and the Model*, although some of the discussion is problematic. Rockett, Hill and Gibbons, for example, write:

> For most of its length, the film [*Reefer and the Model*] is self-consciously modernist[21] and "European"... However, once the bank robbery is embarked upon, there is an apparent switch in aesthetic strategy. The robbery itself, subsequent car-chase and the attempts of the gang to elude the police suddenly provide a narrative momentum which had previously been lacking and encourage a degree of audience involvement, with both characters and situation, that had not hitherto been possible. (273).

As Rockett, Hill and Gibbons point out, before the robbery, the film was essentially non-linear, with an episodic structure as opposed to a constant narrative drive forward. However, the turn towards narrative following the bank robbery is not a simple turn towards a generic/narrative mode. Rather, this move constitutes a more direct commentary on generic conventions, as opposed to the avoidance of such conventions, which had defined the preceding section. This section is possessed of the generic elements of a heist film, but is so anti-climactic as to call attention to the supposedly cathartic nature of such elements. The bank robbery itself is quite unexciting — it is very brief, and takes place not in a large, well fortified "bank" as would befit a hollywood film but in a small, extremely cramped shop equipped with two bankers and a cash box. Such "temporary banks" are common throughout rural areas that would not be served by normal banks, but do not make for a very visually powerful setup for a bank robbery. It is, however, specific to the place where *Reefer and the Model* takes place, and is illustrative of Rockett, Hill and Gibbons' assessment that "both [conventional and modernist elements of the film] succeed in investing these same sets of conventions with a novel dimension by virtue of their adaptation to the settings, situations and characters of the west of Ireland (which, then, themselves become 'strange')" (273). Further, there is no climactic shoot out, and the car chase to which Rockett, Hill and Gibbons elude is not

much of a chase, as Comerford's band of outsiders ditches the gardai almost immediately and are undone by pure (almost pathetic) carelessness on the part of the law.

This allusion to Godard is not merely a pun: Comerford's use of generic conventions recalls the Frenchman in more ways than one. Rockett, Hill and Gibbons seem aware of this Godardian strain, writing that "[w]hat this apparent change in tactic implies, however, is not any straightforward distinction between an 'oppositional,' modernist aesthetic on one hand, and a conventional, commercial aesthetic on the other" (273). Rather, the object of the strategy is to merge the elements, in a way that is at the very center of a Godardian, and indeed Brechtian, aesthetic. Robin Wood has taken Godard to task for his misunderstanding of the Brechtian ideal, and his comments are highly relevant to the push and pull of narrative and "modernism" present in *Reefer and the Model*. He writes:

> Brecht's plays... never *cleanly* dissociate themselves from the basics of "Realist" theater: they retain strong narrative lines, with identifiable and evolving characters, and they don't wholly preclude a certain degree of identification... the plays operate on a fine balance between sympathetic involvement and analytical (or critical) distance. (13, italics his)

Reefer and the Model's strategy is, at its core, about maintaining this balance throughout, and this is a big part of what makes the film characterizable as "modernist." Rockett, Hill and Gibbons draw the lines between the two phases of the film (early = modernist, robbery and after = narrative) in a way that precludes an understanding of the *entire* film as a mixture of distanciation and involvement. Such an understanding is further supported by the general character of the "episodic" sections of the film. These parts of the film, while not cohering in a very linear way, are a far cry from the more

aggressively "modernist" aesthetic of late Godard or, indeed, of Comerford's own early experimental (and unambiguously non-narrative) films such as *Emptigo* (1974) or *Waterbag* (1984). Rather, *Reefer and the Model* falls somewhere in-between, neither an aggressively unconventional work nor an easily digestible, classical hollywood film. Martin McLoone comes closer to capturing the film's overall awkwardness with regards to genre when he writes that "[i]n this clash of styles and traditions, everything is changed and the resultant vision becomes one of amusing, and bemusing, strangeness" (163). It is this sense of "strangeness" (as opposed to a harsher sense, such as alienation) that defines the film overall. Further, this kind of strangeness, this failure to commit to a specific aesthetic perspective (such as totally narrative or totally disjointed) is a hallmark of a modernist viewpoint. Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch write that "[a]t the center of the modernist semantic universe is the individual consciousness, which tries to make itself immune from external influences in order to observe the world from an independent position" (43). Comerford, then, is as independent of hollywood norms as he is of avant gardeists who would dismiss them completely, as independent of the apolitical bourgeoisie as of the militant, romantic nationalists. *Reefer and the Model*, echoing Fokkema and Ibsch, observes the state of contemporary Ireland from a vantage point that is much more independent that would be allowed by the strict regimentation of hollywood form.

The question of *Reefer and the Model*'s adherence to a hollywood model, or its "independent" status, is especially important in the context of the evolution of the Irish national cinema. The film was released in 1988, which was the year after the Bord Scannán na hÉireann (Irish Film Board, hereafter BSÉ) was de-activated because of

government cutbacks. There followed a great deal of debate around the role of the Bord (economic or cultural?), and its re-establishment in 1993 only intensified these debates. *Reefer and the Model* was used by some supporters of the Bord, particularly Paddy Wordsworth, film critic for the Cork *Examiner,* as an example of the kinds of aesthetically important but commercially un-viable films that the government should be sponsoring. Reporting from the Galway Film Fleadh, he wrote in 1988 that "[t]here can be no stronger argument for reviving the Film Board than the tremendously gratifying achievement this film represents" (7). He claimed in remarks at the Cork Film Festival that "[a]s surely as the present Pope is a Polish Catholic, we would not be here tonight watching *Reefer and the Model* if the Irish Film Board had never been established... If the board considered a project to be viable in principle, it would make the producers a pump-priming loan: money to catch money." This kind of support, this "priming of the pump," is a far cry from the £10/week droplets that *Down the Corner* received from the NFSI, and it is indicative of the way that *Reefer and the Model* rides a fine line between the critical and narrative, the cultural and economic. While it would be reductive to suggest a direct ratio between the oppositional character and production cost of a film, the very fact that Comerford's film is this time used as a defense for, as opposed to an example of the shortcomings of, the national film infrastructure, is an indication that the film fits more easily into some mainstream conventions. *Down the Corner* had such a hard time getting government support because its look and its political concerns were so utterly outside the mainstream that it made little sense, from an ideological or marketing point of view, for a state agency to offer support. *Reefer and the Model*, both in its aesthetic and its sociopolitical concerns, is still outside that mainstream, but as evidenced by its status as a

poster film for the state-run Bord, not completely outside. Neither entirely avant garde nor entirely conventional, *Reefer and the Model* serves as an excellent example of what Rockett would refer to as "an acceptance of the economic and cultural merits of film production" (1994:126) that is necessary for Ireland to develop a sustainable, pluralist national cinema.

High Boot Benny (1993)

Noticing Comerford's ongoing use of the dysfunctional family as a metaphor for national issues, Kathleen Murphy has noted that High Boot Benny "makes it abundantly clear that the fatally flawed family in Comerford's portraits is Ireland itself" (33). These flaws violate norms of respectability and present a significant challenge to the myth of rural "family values." The figure who most clearly reflects this breakdown, however, is the woman known in the film only as The Matron. She is seen as someone in complete disarray, both politically, historically and, in an echo of these difficulties, sexually. Comerford also illustrates this disarray in the figure of a young woman who is unable to speak (known only as "the Orphan") and who can react to situations only through essentially violent means (she is the one who finally convinces Benny to join the IRA). Comerford makes it clear that traditional family structures are essentially mythical, but he does so in a way that is just as reductive of the role of women in Irish culture as the romantic Mother Ireland that he so viscerally dismantles. His film is, on this point, a highly problematic fusion of an anti-colonial narrative told in a reactionary fashion.

The opening images of the film are set on the borderline itself, with the young and unkempt Benny smearing rabbit blood on a "Welcome to Northern Ireland" sign and then

being pursued into the Republic by British troops. The troops who violate the Republic's border are looking for the (presumably IRA-affiliated) killers of an informer who was once "The Caretaker" at a school for orphaned boys not far from the border. They let Benny go after some angry interrogation, and he eventually finds his way to that school. It's run by Father Manley, a de-frocked priest, and The Matron, who is a Protestant living in the Republic. Manley and The Matron are eventually shown to be having a long-term sexual relationship, and indeed, one night while they are in bed, the Matron expresses to Manley her very strong desire to have a baby, to make manifest her matriarchal role. The only other female who we spend much time with is known only as The Orphan, who cannot speak. She is shown during one scene to be smuggling blood to wounded IRA men, and at one point Benny catches her with some blood packets, grabs them away and smashes them on the ground. This action results in the IRA tarring and feathering Benny and leaving him hanging in a crucified position. This serves as the most explicitly religious image of the film, and it is also one of its most violent. Eventually Manley is shown to be the one who gave away The Caretaker to the IRA, and Manley and The Matron, are killed by Loyalist (pro-British) paramilitaries hired by the commander of the British army force (a figure who we meet at the beginning of the film). At the funeral of Manley and the Matron, masked members of the IRA stage a show of force, and Benny runs after them as they vanish into the hills. When he unmasks one of them, it turns out to be The Orphan. Benny decides to join them at this stage, and vanishes into the hills with them.

High Boot Benny is quite a striaghtforward film narratively, containing very little of the narrative tweaking that could be seen in *Reefer and the Model*. Indeed, the film is

something of a return to the visually grainy but narratively linear style of *Down the Corner* or *Traveler* except that unlike those two films, *High Boot Benny* is in color). Like those films, *High Boot Benny* seeks to revise conventional representations of Ireland not through an avant garde or modernist approach but through an essentailly narrative style that makes impoverishment conspicuous. *High Boot Benny* differs from these earlier two films simply because it is shot on the sharper and more expensive 35mm, although this does not necessarily disqualify it from status as an oppositonal film. Indeed, Comerford's trademark washed out visuals are certainly on display here, and their purpose is, like the washed out look of *Down the Corner* or *Traveler*, to draw attention to the underdevelopment of the area. Comerford's aestehtic, then, is ultimately paradoxical in much the same way that his entire career had been.

He presents a vision of the Irish postcolonial struggle that is very much consistent with the writings of Frantz Fanon, and indeed which also shares many of the pitfalls of Fanon's ideas about anti-colonial struggle. This is not surprising, since the film is so explicitly concerned with the failure of republican idealism and the neo-colonial abyss that emerged in its wake. Echoing the phases of postcolonial development that Fanon describes and Kiberd finds invaluable, the violent, unstable atmosphere of *High Boot Benny* bears the bitterness that violent revolutions inevitably create. "We have seen that inside the nationalist parties, the will to break colonialism is linked with another quite different will: that of coming to a friendly agreement with it," Fanon writes (124) in summing up the effects of the first governing power in a newly post-colonial state. Anger at this kind of easy acquiescence with the colonial mindset is what drives this film. It becomes clear by the utter absence of the Irish government (in any manifestation) in the

world of the film that the struggle for sovereignty in N.I. is fought by the IRA. That the government should be absent from this region puts the state in an especially harsh light, for not only does this represent a lack of interest in the sovereignty question but also in the lives of the marginalized, since this region is shown to be just as economically underdeveloped as it was during the colonial era. This is not to imply that this makes *High Boot Benny* a pro-IRA film. Actually, the presence of the IRA is seen as being quite destructive (Comerford is unambiguous about their being violent and murderous), and it serves to point out how the government has essentially abandoned this region, and this struggle, to people who will only do wrong. The British, Comerford shows (by making the British Army and an RUC man central players in this struggle) have not made this error of abandonment.

However, the film also bears the mark of Fanon's fervid but often simplifying vision of anticolonial struggle. Fanon writes that "[d]ecolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies" (36). The vision of *High Boot Benny* lends itself well to this kind of binary understanding of the colonial experience, but this is not a very clear understanding of the Irish situation. Even though Comerford's film does a great deal of damage to nationalist delusions about rural purity and familial stability, it is always clear who the enemy is (the British Army men and the loyalist paramilitaries they employ) and who the besieged are (the dysfunctional Catholic boys' school). Anyone who deviates from that norm — such as The Matron (a Protestant woman), Benny (an uncontrollable adolescent who has been tagged as "other" throughout his life), or The Orphan (a mute teenage girl) is either killed

(as the Matron is) or integrated (the Orphan and Benny both wind up being part of the IRA by the end of the film). This kind of easy demarcation makes for a fiery, emotionally powerful, politically charged, and reductive vision of a highly complex conflict.

The boy's school where this film is set is ripe for a reading as an allegory for family. On the level of nomenclature, the two primary adult members of the community are highly emblematic: *Father* Manley and The *Matron*. These two indeed form a de-facto mother and father both in the responsibility that they take for the boys' upbringing but also in the fact that they are sleeping together, and are for all practical purposes married. To speak of a *total* devotion on the part of Manley and the Matron is in no way an overstatement: the incredibly remote setting of the film emphasizes that there is little else in their lives beyond these familial commitments. The family, then, and its centrality to the future of the nation, so often the locus of de Valera era rhetoric, is equally central here. The embattled citizens of the Irish Republic (including Benny) are in this film seen as seeking solace in a community that invoked strong resemblance to home and hearth.

The problem, of course, is that this bears little resemblance to any traditional vision of community. The most glaring violation of tradition is that the father figure is a Father. Indeed, religious piety, and all the moral authority and cultural definition invested in Catholic institutions (including the central institution of marriage and its natural result, children), is completely shattered by the elements of a de-frocked, sexually active priest and his Protestant lover raising a pack of orphaned boys. It is, importantly, made clear that Manley has been having relations with the Matron for some while, and at one point she laments how, in order to protect his position, she had an abortion after becoming pregnant with their child. With this relationship, Comerford pushes a number of buttons

that are very hot indeed in the context of Irish traditionalism, such as intermarriage (or inter-denominational romance), the sexuality of the Catholic clergy and abortion. The purpose of pushing these buttons is clear: his exploitation of cultural taboos shows just how much of a bleary-eyed myth is the notion of family as providing the moral authority for the Irish struggle for self-determination. Everything that is so easily held to be moral and upright by Catholic society is utterly confounded by the relationship between Manley and the Matron. The family was incredibly important to de Valera, but this, he would no doubt insist, isn't what he meant at all.

The Matron, however, is a particularly troublesome figure ideologically in the context of Comerford's anti-colonial (and anti neo-colonial) critique. She is clearly tagged as other, being both a woman in an overwhelming male community and a Protestant from the Republic. The film is filled with references to her ancestry, most notably when she is tending to Benny after he is tarred and feathered by the IRA and she tells him (with much regret) that this is what her ancestors did to Catholics in order to keep their land. Added to this historical sense of otherness, however, is a sexuality which is used in large part to illustrate how askew a place the boy's school is. She has lived her life without a satisfying relationship, as Manley has never fully acknowledged their partnership. She has been frustrated in her attempts to bear children. Most disturbing, however, is the scene where she attempts, unsuccessfully, to seduce Benny after dressing his wounds. Comerford here reverses the oedipal tensions (which are obviously present in a community filled with many young boys, a male patriarch and one woman), locating immature, frustrated sexuality not in the fifteen-year-old boy, but in the only woman in the entire film. Indeed, these anxieties are also present in the only Protestant in the film.

It is in this feminized other that Comerford finds the most deeply seated problems, then, and draws an implicit, and ultimately misogynist, parallel between the Matron's sexuality and her personal history.

The Matron, interestingly, is not the only female in the film, although she is the only woman. There are two girls at the school where *High Boot Benny* is set, and the most central "The Orphan." As with The Matron, The Orphan is an essentially passive female figure, and is used primarily to signify matters involving fear and dread. She is also seen, like The Matron, as an icon and not a fully fleshed out character (she can't speak and has no name, so details of her personality hardly become part of the film's narrative). The burden of representing the nation's struggles, then, falls most heavily upon these two women, both of who are developed only inasmuch that they support the representation of Ireland as a fragmented, confused and disabled nation.

The first blood smuggling sequence foreshadows the Orphan's dangerous, unstable nature. She is established there as a figure who is unstable, unknowable and sometimes violent. She is complementary to the figure of The Matron, who is fragmented, uncommitted and always seeming to be in danger. We understand them both to be figures who solidify this place as dark and maze-like. While Father Manley is also loaded with a fair bit of ideological and cultural iconography, these two females are understood in a way that precludes any kind of agency on their part. Manley is able to act (even if his action does, at the end of the film, end up getting him killed). The Matron and The Orphan are only acted on, or acted through. When one of them does act, as in the case of The Matron's pass at Benny, it is seen as problematic to say the least.

That she is acted *through* is illustrated in the way that The Orphan is shown to be a perpetrator of the assault on Benny. Since his crucifixion is framed as a reprisal for the destruction of the blood packs, it's clear that The Orphan has squealed on him and is therefore culpable. The deed itself is actually performed (offscreen) by the IRA, but they remain masked and infrequently seen. While she is not exactly the only one to have committed the act, she is the only *visible* perpetrator. Even though she has no agency, then, she still bears the responsibility for Benny's pain by virtue of her presence, of her "to-be-looked-at-ness," as Laura Mulvey would say.[22] Indeed, Mulvey writes that "the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified" (35). While this analysis is couched in Freudian psychoanalytic terms (the anxiety to which she refers is castration anxiety) a less genitalia-obsessed tension is clearly present here. Mulvey's insight about anxiety being inherent in the ability to look at women is especially relevant to the place of the Orphan in the film. She is the one who must bear the burden of visibility, and is also the one whose image is the icon of fear.

The final sequence of the film, where Manley and The Matron are buried and Benny joins the IRA with The Orphan, is also important with relation to The Orphan and her to-be-looked-at-ness. This sequence replicates The Orphan's place as the visible icon of the IRA, but neglects to set her apart from the otherwise amorphous collective that this masked band of guerrillas is represented as. She is seen only for her iconic value, and for the anxiety that she is prone to inspiring. When Benny does decide to join the IRA, it is made clear that, as David Butler writes, "the final lesson for Benny appears to be that the Provos[23] are the best of a bad bunch" (31). That this bad bunch, and the anxiety that

surrounds the inevitability of making such an unpleasant, violent decision, is embodied by a teenage girl unable to speak, is entirely consistent with the way that women have thus far been represented. Comerford understands female subjectivity to be something of a paradox, being defined both by passivity and by the creation of anxiety and tension (sexual in the case of the Matron, violence-oriented in the case of The Orphan). In both cases, however, and especially with The Orphan, women are still understood as eternally present if not active, identifiable if not knowable. This burden of representation falls heavy on The Orphan, making her out not so much as a "bad guy" but as the silent location where all the anxieties around "bad guys" are mysteriously deposited.

The film's representation of women constitutes quite an odd reversal of the way that the Irish nation has historically been represented as female. The representation of nation as woman is, naturally, infused with an assumption of virginal (and pre-colonial) purity. Richard Kearney traces these images of purity back to the Ulster plantation, and the Ulster-set *High Boot Benny* could certainly be said to depict this period's legacy.[24] He writes that "[a]fter the plantations of the 17th century, Ireland became frequently identified with a vulnerable virgin ravished by the aggressive masculine invader from England" (119-120). This purity has the double effect of rendering women passive and rendering the imagined/potential nation as innocently righteous. Kearney writes that "elements in the Irish hierarchy — which offered women no real power — increasingly came to equate Ireland with a virginal motherland best served by safeguarding the native purity of 'faith and morals' against the threat of alien culture" (119). There are no such images of purity in *High Boot Benny*, and the nation is understood in a way that is far indeed from innocence.

What Comerford puts in place of an Eden-like Ireland, however, is image after image of a fallen world. Donegal is understood as a place filled with instability: violent, maladjusted teenage boys, RUC and IRA agents, fallen priests, dysfunctionally sexual women and unknowable but all too visible teenage girls. Comerford *reacts* to nostalgic idealists like de Valera, then, as opposed to critically responding to them, or cutting a path around their skewed visions. Where de Valera saw rural pastorals, Comerford sees a dangerously dark landscape. Where de Valera saw the innocence of women, Comerford sees the ways that any action on their part can make a bad situation worse. That Comerford would react so harshly to this failed romanticism is not entirely surprising. Martin McLoone writes of *High Boot Benny* that "Comerford's bleak imagining of the nation is the result of what he sees as the unfulfilled idealism of Irish nationalist rhetoric" (162). The problem Comerford has with romantic nationalism, importantly, is not the anti-pluralist or anti-feminist character of this discourse but the fact that those who made these promises of national purity (like de Valera) were unable to deliver totality and harmony. Further, this kind of reactionary strategy is not uncommon in post/neo-colonial discourse, and Kiberd has discussed such problems in the context of similarity between the ideas of "Celticism" and "Négritude." He writes that "[t]he limitations of Celticism (and Négritude in Africa) emerge from its sources in such a binary opposition to imperial definitions, a reaction with origins in a sense of inferiority rather than in a vision of liberation" (1996: 164). This sense of binaries is clearly present in *High Boot Benny*, and is based in a hysterical quest to throw off the mantle of imperialism. What Comerford fails to realize is that the kind of simplification and homogenization in which he indulges in the name of that quest is essentially a project shared with the imperialists he so loathes.

Colonialist imagery has as its *raison d'être* the homogenization of its subject. Indeed, Chandra Talpade Mohante writes that "colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression — often violent — of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question" (259). Comerford, in making a film that so clearly draws the lines of the colonial struggle, answering more questions than it poses, simplifies and homogenizes a very complex situation in a way that is not at all unlike a colonial strategy.

C. Lynn Innes has also discussed the way that the nation as woman image developed in Ireland, and the way that Comerford, specifically through the character of The Matron, defies the categories she identifies are similarly important. Innes notes that "[b]y the late 19th century, two female images had become potent social, political and moral forces in Catholic Ireland — the images of Mother Ireland or Erin, and the Mother of God, often linked through iconography to Mother Church" (41). While the very name The Matron suggests Mother Erin, she is quite conspicuously not *of* Ireland, and this is made clear through the ongoing references to her Protestant identity and her planter ancestry. Mother Ireland, then, is shown here to be something of a contradiction in terms, or at least something that's far more complicated than nationalist imagery would suggest. The way that Comerford illustrates this, however, is through the easily "other-ized" figure of the Protestant woman, and this is entirely consistent with his use of women as those who must bear the majority of the symbolic weight of national dysfunction. The Matron also self-consciously defies the image of Mother Church, although again in a way that is quite clearly reactionary as opposed to analytical. The Matron, by virtue of her role as mother figure at a Catholic boy's school, is cast conspicuously, indeed literally, as the Mother of the church. This image is taken to its logical extreme by showing her illicit relationship

with Father Manley. It is also clearly evoked when, after Benny is essentially crucified, The Matron cares for him in a way that recalls a mother taking care of a Christ figure. Unlike the adored Madonna, however, this Mother of the Church eventually becomes a martyr herself. Comerford's deconstruction of these particular embodiments of the nation, while contradicting prevailing mythology, does so in a way that understands the female figures (especially The Matron) not as those who have historically paid the price of such simplification, but those who are in effect to be blamed, through their visible difference from nationalist idealism, for the price that the violated, dysfunctional nation has paid.

Landscape, as in *Traveler*, is also of central concern in *High Boot Benny*, although it is represented in a highly problematic way. Donegal's status as thee "border country" leads to an understanding of it as an anxiety-charged location, and *High Boot Benny* makes the most of this part of the sense of place. The kinds of intrusions such as the one that opens the film are rumored to happen with some regularity. That Comerford shows them here to be a matter of routine is itself a fairly inflammatory narrative twist, since such a violation by a foreign army is a de facto act of war. It contradicts, in a very matter of fact way, the position of both the London and the Dublin governments that relations between the U.K. and the Republic are as respectful and peaceful as between any other country. From the very beginning of the film, then, Comerford shows that this is an area where there is a constant threat of violence, either from the enormous British military presence or from the uncontrollable and often fierce local population, embodied here by the (animal) blood-toting Benny.

These kinds of situations are only possible on the Border. Most of the Republic is as calm as Amsterdam or Luxembourg, and even Northern Ireland, in 1993, was quite infrequently marked by the kind of pronounced militaristic tension that was always found on the border. The border remains as a sort of last frontier in Irish life, a final piece of the legacy of British colonialism and all the violence and instability that went with it. This frontier region serves as a repository for all that is not respectable, everything that isn't supposed to exist in the new, peaceful, EU-member Ireland. This fits in nicely with Donegal's historical ambiguity: part of Ulster but part of the Republic, the last bastion of British naval power in the Republic, and the location of the failed promise of the idealism of which de Valera, architect of the 1937 constitution which so clearly spelled out that the religion of Ireland was Catholicism, that women belonged in the home and men on the farm, was so enamored.

This feeling of seediness is complemented by the landscape itself, which Comerford represents as dark, foggy, and mysterious. The final funeral sequence illustrates this seediness potently, and the way that this it looks, and the way that the action is choreographed, is of great importance. The funeral appears to be taking place at twilight, and the images of the people walking up the hill in this misty near-darkness creates a pronounced sense of melancholy. This sense is hardly surprising given that this is a funeral scene, but what makes it worth noting is that this is what almost the entire film has looked like. There is very little sunlight in *High Boot Benny*, and Donegal is seen here as a place that seems to be forever overcast. *High Boot Benny* is of course not as oppressively atmospheric as a film like *Blade Runner* (although both films at times try to locate a kind of melancholic beauty in their images of gloom), but the visual sense of the

film is certainly encapsulated by the final sequence, which is of a *funeral procession*. Further, to call the setting of the *High Boot Benny* rural is a significant understatement, and this sequence, with its extreme long shots of vast and totally empty hills, emphasizes this. Butler writes that "[t]he film presents a 'hard primitivist' version of the Donegal landscape" (31), which is not a very sophisticated way to understand this extremely complex region.

The film takes place not in a complex region, indeed, but in the apparent middle of nowhere, with almost nothing in the way of "civilization" except for this decaying boy's school. There are instead endless hills, dense forests and of course the very large Inishowen peninsula. Further, most of the shots in this final sequence are extreme long shots, where the people in the compositions are fully visible and very small in comparison to the ominous landscape. These extreme long shots are broken up, however, by an extreme close up of the masked face of an IRA man, who points a gun directly at the camera. Comerford, in this sequence, leaves no room for comfortable, in between representations of the elements of this landscape. The surroundings are understood as either impossibly large and distant or terrifyingly immediate. The landscape of the film, then, is dark, difficult to navigate, and a far from friendly European-style civilization. Unsurprisingly, then, it is also extremely unstable and dangerous.

Comerford's strategy in representing Donegal bears some resemblance to representations of "the dark continent" so prevalent in European narratives of Africa. One significant resemblance between these narrative styles is Comerford's representation of Donegal as a place that cannot escape history. "How can I teach you history?" the disgruntled Manley barks at his young pupils. "You have to live with it." This is quite

clearly a place where history does not move forward, where all the demons of Irish culture dwell forever. Writing on *Heart of Darkness*, Christopher L. Miller has noted that "the primitive world which one penetrates is a place where 'backwards' and 'forwards' have no more meaning. . . the forest, and later the desert, are two principle Africanist figures for the loss of directionality" (172). *High Boot Benny* is a journey into a similarly dark place, a place that is understood as being specifically and solely about history, evoked without much nuance and shown to have little hope for forward movement. Miller could easily be writing about *High Boot Benny* when he notes that in *Heart of Darkness* "[t]hese people are thus stuck in time, prior to time, and outside it, in a 'perpetual childhood'" (179). Indeed, the protagonist of Benny is the very portrait of the perpetual child, and the fact that he becomes entangled in one way or another with just about every important character in the narrative indicates how close to this idea of perpetual childhood they all are.

The only way that female subjectivity and rural landscape are represented in *High Boot Benny* are as deeply, and often dangerously, other. The Matron's demise, which is framed as the death of an "innocent," serves as a warning that it is impossible, indeed, deadly, to remain ambiguous in the middle of a war zone. Understanding the Matron's sexuality as a kind of equivalent to the political aspects of her character, this death serves as a kind of completion to the oedipal narrative that Comerford had been hinting at throughout the film. This usage of female subjectivity as a metaphor for an otherness so complete that, lacking any allies at all, it is always killed, echoes all too loudly the sexism and anxiety around gender that plagues an enormous amount of the Republican movement and threatens to secure the United Ireland of which they dream as a neo-

colonial patriarchy. Comerford's use of The Orphan is similarly based in a simplifying, alienating vision of female subjectivity as it relates to anti-colonial struggle. The Orphan has even less agency than The Matron, and is understood, like The Matron, solely in a way that furthers the film's allegory of pain and alienation. Even though The Orphan does end up choosing sides, in so doing she loses herself in a collective, making her subjectivity irrelevant. Further, his understanding of rural landscape, while it has a harshness and anti-romanticism that is similar to his visualization in *Traveler*, is somewhat based in models that owe a great deal to cultural imperialism. Comerford's version of republicanism, despite his contradictions of nationalist romance, is no more able to deal with anything outside clearly defined, masculine norms. Linda Williams writes that "[t]he device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the 'woman's film,'" (138) which refers to melodramas (mostly of the 1930s-50s) which were designed with female consumers in mind. The way that *High Boot Benny* strives to recapture the romantic images of the motherland at the same time that Comerford castigates the actual women and regions of the film is far closer to patriarchal, colonial era norms than its insurgent surface might suggest.

Conclusion

Joe Comerford's films, while varied in subject matter, ideological assumptions and aesthetic strategy, all share some common projects. His work is about making it clear that Ireland is not and will probably never be a big, happy, united family, and he uses a familial metaphor to illustrate Irish disunity throughout his films. His concern throughout

his films, furthermore, is with the proverbial black sheeps, and his work has always focused on characters who are in some way marginalized or excluded from the main stream of Irish life. Further, his work shows just how inadequate hollywood[25] norms are for the evoking the lives of those who refuse to conform to societal conventions. His work, while very much a centerpiece of the Irish "new wave" of the 1970s-90s, rides a fine line between a modernist understanding of the possibilities of cinema (an understanding concerned more with linguistic or aesthetic experimentation than external reality) and an understanding closer to the ideals of Third Cinema or Imperfect Cinema (which is supposed to be a "cinema of the masses," explicitly concerned with external reality). These ideals are not mutually exclusive, but some of Comerford's films are clearly more concerned with aesthetic and narrative experimentation (Reefer and the Model) while others submerge such projects in favor of an explicit political engagement (Traveler, *High Boot Benny*). While he sometimes (especially with *High Boot Benny*) crosses the line separating anti-colonial struggle and a sectarian, reactionary view of culture, his work is significant in recent Irish cinema for the way that it simultaneously refuses to abide by mainstream expectations and promises to set a path towards a vibrant, localized Irish national cinema.

Chapter 2: Thaddeus O'Sullivan" Republican

Like those of his contemporary Joe Comerford, the films of Thaddeus O'Sullivan have always had as their project to de-stabilize what is means to be "Irish." His emphasis has throughout his career been to portray the Irish nation as one that is composed of many different identities, and indeed what can finally be taken from his films is that the identification of a easily unified idea of Irishness is impossible. His films emphasize autonomy, pluralism, and an understanding of *le peuple* as being diverse, not simply members of an easily identified ethnic or national group. In short, they emphasize traditional ideas of "The Republic" as opposed to the reductive, nationalist movement that has come to be known as Irish Republicanism. They also embody much post-colonial idealism about heterogeneity and the appropriation of hegemonic discourse, and serve as models of a post-colonial cinema, even though none of his films are about that cinema's traditional subjects, such as the pushing out of "the colonizers." O'Sullivan is, then, a post-colonial Republican *par extrordinaire*, making films as though the essence of these political ideals were already realized, not the sight of ongoing, violent contention.

Edward Said, among many others, has tackled the essentializing, conservative quality of much anti-colonial discourse, and his insights on Ireland (in the context of a discussion of Yeats) are especially relevant in considering O'Sullivan's work. Writing about nativism across colonial experiences, he laments that:

> it has often led to compelling but demagogic assertion about a native past, narrative or actuality that stands free from worldly time itself. One sees this in such enterprises as Senghor's *négritude*, or in the Rastafarian movement, or in the Garveyite back to Africa project for American Blacks, or in the discovery of unsullied, pre-colonial Muslim essences.... But we have evidence of its ravages: to accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself. To leave the historical world for the metaphysics of

> essences like *négritude*, Irishness, Islam or Catholicism is to abandon history for essentializations that have the power to turn human beings against each other... (1993:228-9)

O'Sullivan's work quite consciously resists this kind of simplicity. All of his films are very much rooted in a historical moment (as opposed to seeking some essence which stands outside history) and a specific place (as opposed to always being set in an easily identified Irish landscape, which was constructed by the 1937 constitution as being essentially rural). They are films of de-stabilization, and of anti-essentialism.

With that kind of ethic in mind, attempting to place O'Sullivan in a republican context is a project that at might seem absurd in the extreme, given the disrepute into which that term has recently fallen. O'Sullivan seems an especially unlikely candidate for supposed inclusion with the likes of Gerry Adams and the Provos, given his perpetual interest in distinctly non-nationalist subjects, such as the experiences of Irish people in Great Britain, Northern Presbyterians at the turn of the century, and Loyalist paramilitaries. Nevertheless, Richard Kearney's recent book *Postnationalist Ireland* seeks in large part to recover the radical, progressive project of republicanism, and his insights on this political ideal have much bearing on O'Sullivan's work. He lists the eight primary characteristics of a republic, and it is worth quoting them here:

1. primary power invested in the people;
2. a mixed balance of separate powers — executive, legislative, judicial;
3. primacy of a "political life" of civic participation based on the Aristotelian model of the citizen as a *zoon politikon*;
4. the virtue of autonomy and self-government in contradistinction to the absolute sovereignty of a monarch or despot;
5. the appeal to a certain universality of value tailored to the historical needs of particular communities in particular times and places;

> 6. a commitment to a plurality of views on justice, transcending inherited dogma and cultivating open debates about the nature of civic *virtue* — i.e. a democratic conflict of interpretations;
> 7. a government by law rather than by persons — with crucial emphasis on the original moment of law-giving, on the founding constitution of first principles;
> 8. a society of equal rights of access, in accordance with the old Athenian principle of *isonomia* — a society in which office was to be widely accessible on an equal footing. (39)

While much of this may seem idealistic or naive, these are the principles that guide O'Sullivan's films. His work centralizes rather than marginalizes the diversity of the Irish experience, and presents a vision of the island that shows that it has, in one way or another, come to terms with this diversity. Far from a nationalist vision of Irish culture, O'Sullivan expresses what Kearney calls "a *new republicanism* — postnationalist and postunionist — which would allow the inhabitants of Ireland to reaffirm their local identities while embracing a new internationalism" (26).

Visualizing the Fifth Province: Documentary, Experimental and Cinematography Work

O'Sullivan began his career as a maker of short experimental and documentary films and as a cinematographer,[26] and the work that he did during this phase serves as a solid introduction to the themes that would occupy him when he turned to narrative filmmaking. His two earliest films as director, *A Pint of Plain* (1975) and *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) are explicitly concerned with the experience of migration, and seek to do coherently evoke the experience of those who, for varying reasons, find themselves in Britain. *The Road to God Knows Where* (1988) is photographed and not directed by O'Sullivan (it was directed by Alan Gilsenan), but the way in which the film is centrally

concerned with the visualization of "home" makes the film of significant importance when considering O'Sullivan's preoccupation with the diasporic experience and his larger concern with the diversity of Irish identity. All three of these films locate "Ireland" and Irish citizenship as a construct that is fluid and not necessarily limited to the island itself, and in that way resemble a view of nationhood that echoes Kearney's theorizing about the "Fifth Province."[27] Overall, these works open up the concept of national self in a way that looks radically different than but is entirely consistent with O'Sullivan's narrative films, which also pose radical challenges to nationalist simplicities.

Kearney's idea of the "Fifth Province" is part and parcel of his recovery of the republican tradition, and it is in some ways an expansion of the plurality that is so important to him. He writes that the Fifth Province "is not a fixed point or a centralized power. It is not the source of some 'unitary and indivisible sovereignty.' If anything, it may be re-envisioned today as a network of relations extending from local communities at home to migrant communities abroad. The fifth province is to be found, if anywhere, at the swinging door which connects the 'parish' (in Kavanaugh's sense) with the 'cosmos'" (100). This kind of spiritual continuum, however, must not be understood as sterile, globalized, a kind of Irishness without place. Rather, Kearney notes that "[t]he drift towards a more *global* understanding of identity calls for a countervailing move to retrieve a sense of *local* belonging" (102). As O'Sullivan shows, this attention to local reality is as important on each side of the exchange that defines this fifth province. These first films seek neither a nostalgic return to a lost Ireland nor an erasure of what was once home in exchange for the "newer" space of Britain or the United States.

O'Sullivan's first film as director, *A Pint of Plain*, is a narrative drama of sorts, although its decentered point of view echoes the way in which it understands "the motherland." The film follows a few Irish expatriates as they try to make some sense of their somewhat unfamiliar surrounding while remaining a closely knit group. One of the young men in the group essentially loses his mind, and he is seen during one sequence wandering through Hyde park, rambling on and bothering passersby. London is represented here as a deeply hybridized space, neither living up to romantic notions of "Englishness" nor being able to satisfy the various expatriates' longing for home. Mark Karlin has noted that the film makes extensive although highly critical use of the conventions of British "kitchen sink" films, writing that "[i]t was hallucinating to see the props of British cinema drifting from their moorings as if a poltergeist had invaded the land. That the 'furniture' was at last flying was solely due to the fact that the characters central to the film were all exiles/immigrants" (cited in Rocket, Hill and Gibbons 140). This effect of "drifting from their moorings" could serve as a summary of the film overall: it is about a group of people who are re-negotiating familiar aspects of everyday life. Neither Irish nor British, the space that they inhabit is deeply hybridized, and very much part of the Fifth Province.

In addition to a use and displacement of common cinematic tropes, such as those of British realism, the film adds to its somewhat disorienting (or perhaps re-orienting) through the use of an elliptical narrative style. Nothing much happens in *A Pint of Plain*: the climax of the film, if it can really be called that, is when all three of the expatriates converge in a park and one announces he is going home. Aside from that, the film is comprised mostly of images of a few Irish guys hanging around in pubs, strip bars and

parks, looking alienated. The lack of narrative drive in *A Pint of Plain* is more than a simple matter of expressing how these guys' lives are going nowhere. Rather, it's an illustration of how they don't approach their British exile as a temporary, or linear experience, but likely as something ongoing. The last shot of the film seems to indicate this. O'Sullivan closes with an extreme long shot of the cityscape of London, with the protagonists, now all assembled together in a park, just barely visible as they walk away from the camera. It is an image of individuality lost in a sea of London-ness, but it is also an image that conveys the hugeness of the city they are now inhabiting, and gives a sense that their struggle with the city continues onward., O'Sullivan's wanderers are neither assimilated nor entirely resistant. Similarly, while the mini-narrative leads the viewer to a certain conclusion, the story of these expatriates doesn't really conclude.

The form of *On a Paving Stone Mounted* resists easy conclusions in a similar way. The first part of the film is a combination of re-enactment and semi-documentary sequences comparing life in London with the life in Ireland that a community of expatriates has left behind. The second part of the film (which is denoted by a title) is more clearly a documentary or "non-fiction," and it features some of the people from the first section talking about romantic visions of home, concluding with a scene where well known *seanachí* Eamon Kelly tells a story about an emigrant's life in the United States. As in *A Pint of Plain*, the film's central concern is with the Irelands that people create outside of the island itself, and the differences from the "real" Ireland that these little corners of the fifth province illustrate. There is a great deal of talk in both sections about romantic visions of home and how such imagining becomes a problem. A common

thread through the film is the power of exaggeration, or the way that people tend to form narratives around their lives.

Indeed, what is especially notable about the film, though, is how it takes apart the way such narratives are made. The second half of the film is on one level a deconstruction of the first half, seeming to show the source of these narratives of displacement and longing in a way that a conventional documentary would simply present them without showing the kinds of doubts and contradictions that form them. Further, the first half is quite split between fictional and documentary impulses, with one genre essentially bleeding into the other. It's never totally clear which section of the film is to be taken as "real" and which as "fictional," a blur that is echoed by the use of Kelly, famous *seanachí* that he is, telling a *story* about emigration that could be emblematic or could be documentary. This is a fractured film, one that, like *A Pint of Plain* uses a wide variety of sometimes disparate or conflicting cinematic elements in order to create a portrait of the fragmentation of Irish expatriate life.

The collage technique used by these films is an echo of the concept of the fifth province and the idealism of the republic. Kearney writes that "as long as Irish people think of themselves as Celtic Crusoes on a sequestered island, they ignore not only their own diaspora but the basic cultural truth that cultural creation comes from hybridization not purity, contamination not immunity, polyphony not monologue" (101) Polyphony is exactly the ethic that defines these early experimental films, both of them being combinations of documentary/realist and artificial/narrative combinations, both of them coming to minor climaxes at the same time that they both are essentially elliptical in structure. Comerford's early films are his most hybridized, and indeed they look very

much like the "hybrid exile cinema" that would become so central in the European and American avant garde of the 80s and 90s. Discussing the fragmented aesthetic of such films, Laura U. Marks has written that "[e]xperimental diasporan cinema digs between strata, using a mixture of filmic languages to tell the unofficial stories of exile, emigrant, or culturally-mixed people.... When someone's experience does not fit into the categories provided, it brings back the histories that are repressed — just as a fossilized fragment visibly recalls the forgotten struggles of past generations. Hybrids reveal the process of exclusion by which nations and identities are formed" (251). This laying out of narrative mechanics is quite central to both of these films and indeed serves as a microcosm of their tales of the unpredictable boundaries of the Irish condition. O'Sullivan uses a hybridized form to illustrate the diversity — in terms of individual experience, culture, and even geography — of the Irish experience. This emphasis on pluralism is an example not only of the belief in a fifth province, but of a republican approach to national self.

The documentary film *The Road to God Knows Where*, while photographed but not directed by O'Sullivan, deals so explicitly with these issues in so primarily visual a fashion that it is worth a brief discussion. The film is a wandering meditation on the experience of modernity and emigration on modern Irish culture, mostly comprised of interviews, but also featuring some more artificial imagery (a shot of a lounge singer, who at one point sings "Danny Boy," is a recurring image). There are numerous interviews with young people, many of whom now live in the United States, who sing the praises of a cosmopolitan identity and bemoan the economic desolation that defined Ireland in the late 1980s. Visually the film is quite fragmented, featuring some recurring interviewees but never staying very long with any one of them. Sections of the film are also separated

with title cards, such as "Belfast is a cracker" for a section that deals with the collective confusion about the crisis in N.I. or "We Are the Young Europeans," a title that cynically echoes the IGM marketing slogan as it introduces a section where young people dreamily profess their pride in being Irish. The film is overall a collection of images about the fragmented lives they Irish young people find themselves living, and is an attempt not to make sense of that lack of fixity but to reflect it cinematically. Put beside *A Pint of Plain* and *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, the film is very much part of O'Sullivan's obsession with the boundless, arguably postmodern character of the Irish nation. Kearney links an Irish "postnationalism" with a Lyotardian sense of the postmodern, writing that "[t]he ultimate reference of postmodern narrative is not some totalizing center of meaning — Party, King, Nation-State — but other narratives. In other words, postmodern narratives are multiple, diverse, non-subsumable into some final solution" (63). This understanding of identity as a complex web of diverse narratives is a condition that, O'Sullivan shows in all three films, is by and large the result of a stagnant local economy and the ever-present lure of emigration.

This early work by O'Sullivan illustrates many themes that would crop up in his more straightforwardly narrative work. The radically fragmented form of these films hailed the coming of an innovative Irish cinematic voice, quite unlike any filmmaker working in or about Ireland up to that time. Indeed, the films also challenged conventional notions of Irish selfhood, showing it, like Kearney's fifth province, to be no so much about a state as a state of mind. This early work privileges fragmentation and plurality over a false unity, and in that way betrays a republican view of national identity. Whether seen as sketches

for more fully realized films or complex meditations in their own right, these early films by O'Sullivan are crucial in understanding his place in Irish film culture.

Self and Colonized Imaginations: The Woman Who Married Clark Gable

The first film O'Sullivan made in 35mm continued some of his ongoing concerns about the nature of Irishness, although this film engaged more directly with the role of fantasy amidst cultural repression. *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable*, then, is less about national self than about a woman bombarded by different visions of what self should be. O'Sullivan here shows that a sense of self is inherently constructed, often to serve a specific cultural moment. He also illustrates an attitude towards hollywood that was quite common for the period in which the film is set, and which is an ambiguous mixture of liberation and repression (albeit with a new face). Neither romantic about the possibilities of "the movies" nor puritanistic about hollywood's narcotic effect, *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* is O'Sullivan's attempt to show just what a confused time the beginning of the de Valera era was.

The film, set in the 1930s, centers around an older married couple in Dublin, George, an Englishman, and his Irish wife Mary. When the film opens, Mary is beginning to feel despondent over their childlessness. This happens parallel to her increasing obsession with the movies, particularly with Clark Gable, who she believes her husband resembles after he grows a mustache. While this has the effect of re-vitalizing their love life, this is a temporary development and O'Sullivan makes it clear that these two will go on leading their very drab and somewhat repressed lives, once their Saturday matinees have ended.

O'Sullivan uses Mary's construction of her husband as a way to show just how fluid a sense of self can be, given the right combination of personal, cultural and socio-political forces. When she starts to think that George looks like Clark Gable, it seems clear that this is a reaction to the drabness and emptiness of her life. Indeed, she has regularly lamented on their status as childless, and about how she feels unfulfilled. What Mary achieves through the Clark Gable projection, however, is far indeed from a fantasy of maternal fulfillment. Rather, living out the fantasy of *San Francisco* (the movie that began to give her the idea in the first place) provides a kind of emotional satisfaction that would be quite unavailable to her as the satisfied mother that conservative Irish Catholic culture expects her to be. Rather, this fantasy serves as an attempt to locate her own sense of self in a place that is outside the framework of the mainstream culture, not as a satisfied mother but as a satisfied lover. The fantasy, then, emerges as a kind of response to a variety of pressures, both personal (Mary feels lonely) and social (conservative Irish culture seeks to alleviate that loneliness in a way that is unresponsive to her everyday needs). When all of these forces converge upon her, Mary's fantasy-oriented response seems the only way to reconcile these conflicts, and serve as a useful means for stepping *outside of* a social environment that would keep her passive and unsatisfied.

O'Sullivan's choice to make that escape in the form of Clark Gable movies, however, sheds light on the paradoxical place that hollywood occupies in Irish culture. Much like the situation in France, where American films were banned during the German occupation and allowed once again following liberation, hollywood films in Ireland offered an escape from the rigid, utilitarian ethic of de Valera-era Ireland. Indeed, Kevin Rockett notes that "especially from the 1920s to the 1950s, it is probably true that

hollywood cinema provided an attractive and perhaps liberating alternative to official ideologies" (cited in McLoone, 150). O'Sullivan makes this liberatory potential quite explicit, most clearly in the scene where a priest tells Mary to stop going to the movies, to try to be a good wife. O'Sullivan's narrative also makes it clear, however, just how much of a hold these images have on Mary's imaginary, and her agency as well Indeed, the most potent image of the invasive character of these images comes when Mary and George are in bed, and George can be seen to have a pencil-thin mustache, trying very hard to live up to his wife's wish for him to be Clark Gable. While hollywood had the potential to push Irish people out of the confessional, then, it also had a way of pushing itself into their bedrooms.

This ambiguous relationship that Mary has with hollywood cinema is especially important in the context of a nation whose image culture has been as colonized by hollywood as Ireland's has been. As discussed in the introduction, there were, until the mid-70s, very few representations of Ireland that had been created by Irish people. The centrality that hollywood occupied in the Irish imaginary was not even modestly challenged by the presence of a small, independent cinema (which was the case in other small European states like Poland or Spain[28]). Ireland enjoys an essentially neo-colonial relationship with hollywood, quite similar indeed to Canada's. O'Sullivan's evocation of a colonized imagination, then, which is set against the rabid nationalism that defined de Valera, is dualistic indeed. An external colonialism, it is made clear here, was quickly replaced by various sorts of internal colonialism. Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill have echoed this sentiment, writing that "Ireland's peripheral (and ex-colonial) status has not simply hampered the possibilities for a native film industry but, in its absence has also

made possible a set of cinematic representations which have tended to sustain a kind of cultural inferiority" (xi). The legacy of this cultural inferiority is seen quite clearly in the character of Mary, with a malleable sense of self and a longing for the glamour of hollywood. British caricatures portraying the Irish as simian or otherwise inferior were central to the process of colonialization and Anglicization. What O'Sullivan shows here is that hollywood has been much shrewder in its colonizing strategy. Rather than distributing to Irish audiences a plethora of reductive images (which it certainly created in the form of Irish policemen or "pleasant Paddys," although not in the kind of volume that defined anti-Irish British caricature), the most effective colonization of the supposedly post-colonial Irish consciousness has come primarily through a simple lack of images. Irish identity is not shown by hollywood to be deformed or inferior, it is shown to be irrelevant. Mary must satisfy her imagination elsewhere, and in the process loses sight of who she is.

The Woman Who Married Clark Gable sets out, in a very non-confrontational (and seemingly apolitical) way, the issues which O'Sullivan had begun to explore in his experimental films and would continue to wrestle with in his narrative features: the heterogeneous nature of post-colonial Irish culture, the effect of repressive, insulated societies on individual subjectivity, and the necessity to find a middle ground between resistance and accommodation. The situation faced by Mary is very much a microcosm of Irish culture in the shadow of hollywood, and while O'Sullivan's anti-colonial analysis is fairly explicit, it is rendered in the form of a fairly innocuous story about a lonely woman full of longing. This narrative style itself echoes what would become the defining ethic of O'Sullivan's second phase of filmmaking: the mixing of conventional narrative

with a more oppositional, political and open-ended approach. In this way, it is a key film in his *œuvre*, very much signaling a move from an experimental to a hybrid but essentially narrative film practice.

Women and the ambiguities of post-colonialism: *December Bride*

O'Sullivan's first feature narrative is startling most immediately because of its basic subject matter. Even though the film centers around a community of Ulster Presbyterians, however, this is not the only way that it unseats received notions about Irish identity. O'Sullivan locates the struggle for self-determination with the female protagonist, who is shown throughout to be a radical anti-traditionalist. The overall effect of the film, however, is to produce a quite unique and fully rounded vision of Irish post-coloniality, rooted, ironically, in the community that most would hold to be the colonizers. Further, O'Sullivan understands traditionalism in a most complicated and ambiguous way, showing it to be simultaneously a path towards liberation and repression, given different circumstances. His film, then, lives up to much of the promise of post-colonial rhetoric, insisting in every aspect on the de-centering of oppressive, and especially of patriarchal, myths of identity, both national and personal.

December Bride is essentially a narrative about two brothers, Frank and Hamilton, and the woman who lives with them, Sarah. All three are part of the Presbyterian community of the Strangford Lough area, and Sara's mother had been the housekeeper for Frank and Hamilton for many years. When Sarah enters into a sexual relationship with the two brothers, her mother leaves the house and the brothers seem to both become *de facto* (if not *de jure*) husbands for her. This arrangement is complicated when Sara

gives birth to a daughter and refuses to name which one of the brothers is the father. This, of course, becomes a problem for the rest of the community, who pressure the *menage à trois* to change their ways and conform to traditional structures. Tthey refuse. At the conclusion of the film, she finally marries Frank so that her daughter can have a name and get married herself. Sara's is clearly a marriage of necessity, though, reflecting neither greater affection nor paternity.

What is most immediately striking about *December Bride* is simply that it focuses on a group of Ulster Presbyterians. To read this only as an expression of loyalist sympathies, however, would miss the many of the political possibilities of the subject matter. Within a pan-Irish context (which is to say, the Republic *and* N.I.) Protestant communities, despite the legacy of the Protestant Ascendancy, have a certain "otherness" about them. Brian McIlroy has taken this up in an explicitly cinematic context, seeing Protestant loyalists as occupying a feminized location within Irish film and reading a number of recent Irish films dealing with Protestant loyalists within a Mulveyan framework. He writes that "the nationalist community in Northern Ireland is a minority community; the unionist community is a majority community but only in Northern Ireland. Erase the border, and they become a minority community" (1996, 147). His essay has many problems (the border, after all, is very much *not* erased, and, one could argue, exists with the *specific* purpose of making loyalists a majority community, so this image of the vanishing border has the unpleasant effect of rendering his important insights fanciful and detached from political reality) but this point about the marginalization of Protestant and loyalist subjectivity in recent Irish film is well taken, and highly relevant to *December Bride*. In much the same way that Comerford attempts to do, O'Sullivan uses this

portraiture to unseat nationalist simplification about what it means to be Irish. His understanding of the northern part of Ireland is that, for better or for worse, it is a highly diverse place. Comerford also understands this region as being highly diverse, of course, but he uses that element to indicate doom, fear, and the failure of nationalist promises. O'Sullivan, on the other hand, uses precisely that lack of fixity to enunciate the possibility of difference, which is a core part of the quest for a post-colonial state.

O'Sullivan emphasizes the "otherness" of Protestant communities by portraying a group of Ulster *Presbyterians*. The elite of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy were not Presbyterians, but Anglicans. Ulster Presbyterians, as Peter Newman notes, "as dissenters, or non-communicants to the Church of Ireland, which was the test of respectability in eighteenth-century Ireland, suffered some of the same disadvantages suffered by Catholics" (169). Indeed, the famed 1798 Rebellion, modeled after the principles of the French Revolution, was led by Presbyterians. "Many of these principles," Kearney notes, "were quite compatible with certain enlightenment sentiments contained within the more radical strains of Presbyterianism itself" (31). As Newman goes on to note, however, Presbyterians also became critical members of the Orange Order and crucial supporters of British Union with Ireland. O'Sullivan has chosen a group, then, that does not easily embody the unambiguous image of "the colonizers." This choice sets the stage for what will be his radical re-evaluation of the meaning of post-coloniality. Fanon writes that "decolonization is quite simply the replacement of a certain 'species' of men with another 'species' of men" (35). Leaving aside for the moment the question of "men," *December Bride* shows that decolonization, in an Irish context, is not such a simple, binary matter.

This complexity is emphasized during a scene where an older woman comes to the Sara's house for dinner. As Sara waits on her and the two men of the house, she is annoyed when the old woman refuses to eat the roast beef, since it is Friday and she is a Catholic. The men are embarrassed and ask Sara to find some fish. Sara is annoyed by the cultural eccentricity, seeming to see such insistence as ungracious. This scene does not so much make a point about who is the aggressor and who is the accommodator, but illustrates how these categories are inherently blurred. Catholic rigidity, which is equally about the role of women as it is about what to eat on Fridays, is seen as distinctly offensive to the independent, anti-conformist Sara, and she clearly resents the encroachment on her highly protected domestic sphere. This sequence also, however, shows Sara in a distinctly negative light, making her seem inhospitable and arrogant, despite (or perhaps as a cause of) the intense anti-authoritarianism that she has exhibited throughout the film. In short, *December Bride* is constantly making the viewer aware of the inherent paradoxes of the political projects it evokes. Mohante, in criticizing much western feminist understanding of post-colonial women, has written that "Western feminists appropriate and 'colonize' the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries" (260). Throughout *December Bride*, O'Sullivan makes it clear that there are a wide variety indeed of classes, religions, and cultures in Ireland, and that understanding how they all come together to create the Irish nation as it actually exists (and not as it exists in nationalist mythology) is highly complex and does not always create unambiguous protagonists or antagonists.

The community that O'Sullivan portrays, then, is far from idealized, and failure of the film to proselytize or provide easy solutions, as in the fish on Friday sequence, is indicative of his overall project. What distinguishes O'Sullivan's vision of Ulster on its way towards postcoloniality from Comerford's nightmarishly neo-colonial Ulster is that the latter viscerally and emotionally manipulates the viewer towards an anti-British position via a reductive allegory while the former offers a clearheaded although ambiguous (clearheaded, indeed, because it is ambiguous) narrative about the inevitable changes that the passing from one era into another entails. The difference between the two is more than a simple question of tone. Comerford's narrative strategy, despite the ambiguous ending of *High Boot Benny*, is as manipulative and monological as any hollywood film. O'Sullivan's narrative style, in contrast, is much cooler, much more in keeping with the ethic of Third or oppositional cinema. The founders of the Third Cinema movement, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, wrote that in mainstream film, "[m]an is viewed as a *consumer of ideology*, not as the creator of ideology" (51). Comerford clearly expects his viewer to consume wholeheartedly his anti-colonial passion. O'Sullivan offers no opportunity for such consumption, making instead a film that offers no nationalist imagery (either simplified and idealistic or nightmarishly out of control), no political pieties, and no ideological closure.

This lack of closure is especially important when considering the way that *December Bride* represents the struggles of women. The ending is the film's clearest example of a failure to provide a clear ideological position. Sarah, *December Bride*'s main character, has been marginalized her entire adult life by her refusal to name which of the two brothers she lives with is the father of her child. While Sarah never seems especially

upset by this marginalization, O'Sullivan is not trying to argue that it is a given that this kind of existence has a morally superior quality to which everyone should aspire. Indeed, when that child grows up, she very much wants to marry and have a "normal" life, so Sara is compelled to name, perhaps arbitrarily, the man who is her biological father. The moment of Sara's decision to break with the struggles of the last twenty years is evoked by a long close up of her face with a blank expression. This image is quite different from the shot of a woman's face which has a similarly climactic effect in *High Boot Benny*. Here, rather than signifying the visibility of a particular ideological choice, the shot of Sara in deep contemplation signifies the paradoxes inherent in such ideological positioning. This particular part of the narrative also crystallizes these paradoxes, as it becomes clear that even though Sara has lived her entire life as someone opposed to the oppressive strictures of tradition, the next generation will be the ones not to embrace this quest towards a perceived modernity but to find empowerment, and indeed identity (since her daughter tells Sara that she wants a name, and by extension a more fully realized sense of self), through *tradition*. Fanon, in a characteristically fiery but simplistic style, writes of tradition that "[t]he desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people" (224). This moment where Sara decides to embrace tradition is a sequence that features an ambiguous choice along the lines of the climax of *High Boot Benny* (like Benny's embrace of the IRA, Sara's agreement to name her child's father is far from triumphant). Unlike *High Boot Benny*, however, and unlike Fanon's assessment of the relationship between tradition, history and solidarity, this sequence is an affirmation not of the need to choose *something* as the only way to avoid death, but of

the inherently contradictory nature of all such choices, and the forever bittersweet character of life in a heterogeneous, forever shifting territory. It is a moment that, like the film as a whole, refuses to provide a simple answer, despite any simple political advantages that might be gained.

Another very important part of *December Bride*, like the re-positioning effect of its subject matter of Ulster Presbyterians, is its choice to locate the center of postcolonial struggle with women's experiences. This is a much more complicated matter than *December Bride* simply being understood as a Northern Irish version of a 1950s-style "women's picture." Indeed, putting the film in the context of oppositional British filmmaking of the 80s and 90s, Paul Willeman has written that

> *Rocinante* [by the British collective Cinema Action] is as different from road movie romances as *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984) or *December Bride* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1991) are from films with strong heroines. In each case, the difference is not generated by a surfeit of formal innovation, or by the pursuit of a marketable variation on a theme, but because the prevailing generic codifications are too restrictive for the articulation of their social-analytical purposes." (202)

The social-analytical purpose of *December Bride* could be understood as deeply unseating received notions of national self, which is so often understood to be passive, chaste, female, and Catholic. Further, the film understands women as the center of active struggle, as opposed to understanding women as the passive center of spectacle, as in conventional melodrama. This film works in the exact opposite way that Williams describes the "women's film," declining to validate romantic ideas about woman-as-nation, but giving the embodied women agency and centrality.

Indeed, *December Bride* serves as a potent corrective to the way that women have historically been understood in contemporary Irish life. Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch has

written that directly following independence "Irish women were encouraged, first and foremost, to be mothers whose duty it is to inculcate their children (especially their sons) with love of country, of Gaelic traditions, and of freedom... The homosocial bonding of nationalism required the exclusion of women from the body politic" (27-28). Sara's life is on the surface in keeping with this de Valera-esque imagination: she is removed from the political and social life of the community, which is left to the two men with whom she lives, and clearly has motherhood as her primary identity. O'Sullivan turns this nationalist delusion on its head, however, by illustrating how all of these conventions are, despite outward appearances, shattered by Sara. She is not teaching her child (who, significantly, is not a son but a daughter) "Gaelic tradition," or even Anglo-Saxon tradition, for that matter. Rather, she is teaching her (although the attempt is finally seen as somewhat futile) to *defy* such tradition, essentially moving political action into the domestic sector into which she seems so safely confined.

The "homosocial bonding of nationalism" is a part of life in loyalist communities too, and at one point the brothers are told that unless they make their *menage à trois* a legitimate family, they will be excluded from all political and religious institutions. They decline to go along with this, however, understanding Sarah's choices as far more important to their lives than belonging to the Orange Order, who, one man says, will reject them and thereby solidify their ostarcization from the community. O'Sullivan represents these matters as being important to patriarchs and authoritarians, matters entirely subsumed here to the centralized realm of the domestic. Indeed, it is not only Sarah who finds herself on the margins of society but the brothers as well, and O'Sullivan's film visualizes not only a new form of Irish Feminism but a very radical

revision of masculinity as well. While Sarah claims at one point that Frank is clearly the head of the family, both of the brothers actually seem to subsume, quite willingly, the hierarchies traditionally inherent to family life. Indeed, because of this collectivization, they become just as marginalized as, if not more so, than Sarah herself.

The redefinition of family, hierarchy, and the importance of domestic (as opposed to public) life is especially important in an Irish context, since the character of the national ideal is still very much the subject of negotiation. Geraldine Meany writes that throughout Ireland "the language of patriarchy... presents the masculine as the norm and the feminine as an aberration... The public domain, which was for so long the domain of men, is also the domain where discourse proliferates. The 'private' domain, women's traditional 'sphere,' is very often the realm of the oblique and unspoken" (241). The private domain is indeed seen in *December Bride* as that of the oblique and unspoken, but this is also the domain where the discourse (which, in *December Bride*, is oblique and based upon often unspoken understandings, contemplation or tensions) proliferates. This is the sphere where the negotiations that re-define the lives of the characters takes place. It is also the sphere where the appearance of post-colonial Irish culture is radically altered, and putting aside the very different vision of that identity that emerges, the very fact that this is negotiated from the point of view of a domestically focused woman is exceptional, and radically subversive, in and of itself.

Too often the nature of anti-colonial struggle is seen as throwing out the aggressors by force, neglecting all other forms of resistance and national definition. Fanon's writing is in many ways the classic example of this ethic. He writes that "the naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate

from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists" (37). Not only is this part of anti-colonialism inherently anti-pluralist, it is also highly masculinized. Discussing this masculinization of Irish anti-colonialism, Margaret Ward has noted that "(t)he conspiratorial physical force tradition that has characterized so much of Irish republicanism is essentially male in its assumptions and in its operations" (48). *December Bride* cuts a path not only around traditional republicanism as the sole locus of post colonial identity, but, by shifting the focus away from violence, also around the masculinization of anti-colonial struggle, and the formation of a post-colonial identity once that struggle is concluded. *December Bride* is about the search in the long-oppressed nation of Ireland for individual liberty, the creation of small, non-authoritarian communities that break with repressive tradition, and the quest to include numerous, as opposed to merely the strongest, groups and traditions. These are certainly the goals of post-colonialism, and these goals are pursued without any murderous struggles, and without anything that could be understood as decisive.

Indeed, what this violation of conventionality, on all levels, illustrates is that post-coloniality is not so much the absence of the British but the presence of a liberatory pluralism. The often hyper-masculine Fanon has nevertheless written about this pluralism in the context of gender. He insists that a newly founded national government "must guard against the danger of perpetuating the feudal traditions which holds sacred the superiority of the masculine element over the feminine. Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution, but in the life of every day" (202). For Fanon, then, and also for O'Sullivan, what is most important is that the reality

of gender differences in all aspects of national life be respected, and indeed integrated into the fabric of the post-colonial state. This means not only making coldly written policies regarding the rights of women, but integrating non-masculine paradigms into the day to day life of the nation. O'Sullivan's film is very much about this re-defining of the Irish everyday to include women. Most importantly, however, it is about understanding the potential Irish republic as a plurality of often contradictory voices, not merely as a falsely unified entity. Such unification, after all, while masquerading as objective truth, is almost always representative of the dominant/masculine position.

All of this is entirely consistent with Kearney's recovery of the republican tradition, especially considering his insistence on the balance of the national and the local. He writes that:

> ...there is, I believe, a great need for a novel appreciation of the *universalist* dimension of republicanism, as we move towards greater integration with the common house of Europe. And there is a corresponding need for a reappreciation of its *localist* dimension, if we are ever to realize the possibilities of participatory democracy which the project for a decentralized Europe of the regions will, if achieved, open up. (37, emphases his).

This kind of national duality is clearly visible in *December Bride*. The film's overall effect is clearly to draw attention to a marginalized aspect of the Irish experience, to visualize the island as a place steeped in diversity, both politically and culturally. Its aspirations are clearly universalist in this way, showing that geopolitical spaces and historical moments are never easily unified or essentialized, and that this immobility to summarize is, in essence, what keeps a community from dying. Indeed, Said's observation about Yeats' "universalism that is not limited or coercive, which believing that all people have a single identity is" (1993:229) is certainly an echo of a republican

world view. That said, the film also has a distinctly local outlook, which is most clearly expressed by the narrative's centralization of domestic life. The film is a mediation on identity, then, but it handles this grandiose subject in a way that is rooted in a very clearly visualized sense of time and place. As in all of his films, a United Ireland could not be further from what O'Sullivan is portraying. But also as in all of his films. he understands the condition of Ireland from a distinctly republican point of view.

What O'Sullivan presents is an Ireland that is not quite right: not Catholic but Protestant, not masculinized but feminist, finding its identity not in the public but in the domestic sphere, not traditionalist but radical. The overall effect of this displacement is to illustrate that despite the nationalist quest for homogeneity, the finding of an Irish post-colonial self-image is a complicated, ever-evolving task. Michael Mays has summed up the complications of Irish post-coloniality eloquently, writing that "returning to the elysian fields of 'Irishness,' simply initiates the cycle anew; by seeking to avoid the burden of history, one is condemned to an endless series of beginnings again... the desire to fix an identity outside of that history, especially national identity... becomes increasingly problematic as the emphasis in nation-building shifts from the oppositional nationalism of decolonization to the hard work of shaping the post-colonial state" (18). *December Bride* is a film about the post-colonial moment seen from the point of view of a nation that has already achieved independence, and is now ready to move on to other matters. The film is perhaps better classified as a post-anticolonial work, getting its energy not from the violent, blinding and hyper-masculine project of oppositional nationalism, but with an eye to shaping a post-colonial state, comprised of numerous nations. It is also well described, of course, as a republican film. It is a republican film

not because of the way that it imagines Ireland without the British, but because it provides a vision of Ireland that includes the British without the need for structural domination on the part of any of the people who, despite the chagrin of romantic nationalists, make up the nation of Ireland.

Representing Violence: *Nothing Personal*

On the surface, O'Sullivan's second feature film looks like a considerable departure from his innovative, unconventional narrative style. Indeed, in a review in the *New Republic*, Stanley Kauffman placed squarely in the emerging genre of the "troubles film," a genre he felt tended to commercialize and simplify a very complex set of conflicts. Indeed, in his review of *Nothing Personal* he warned that "[t]he worst thing that could happen to Ireland in the film world, vis-à-vis the gravity of Irish troubles, is for films on that subject to degenerate into a genre" (26). The film does indeed seem to fall into narrative conventions that gloss over some of the complexities of the northern situation. However, it also portrays the divided city of Belfast with much more complexity, and with a much higher level of detail, than most of the other films in Kaffman's genre of compromise, such as *The Boxer* or *Some Mother's Son*. O'Sullivan's rendering of The Troubles, indeed, seems distinctly non-hollywood, given its insistence on local knowledge and its assumption of the heterogeneity of a city which, outside Ireland, is understood primarily in terms of the hell that the IRA is raising. Further, for a film that is largely noted because it, like *December Bride*, centralizes the Protestant communities of N.I., it fits quite well into an idea of classical Republicanism. Overall, then, this is a deeply hybridized film. As Willemen writes of *December Bride*, the film is more than a

simple stretch of the genre of the "Troubles Film;" what O'Sullivan wants to deal with here is beyond the limits of that genre. Like all his films, it uses many of the conventions of classical form, but ultimately emerges as a text that is quite local in its orientation and in conflict with a simplified, globalized hollywood.

Nothing Personal takes place in Belfast in 1975, as paramilitary bosses attempt to negotiate a cease-fire. The action centers around two friends who are both part of an unnamed Loyalist[29] paramilitary group. The film's protagonist, Kenny, is constantly having to get his incredibly violent friend Ginger out of trouble with the conservative leadership of the group. O'Sullivan shows their daily (and nightly) routine in great detail, including many images of the bar where they hang out and often act as armed guards. On the other side of the Belfast "peace wall" is Liam, whose wife has left him and who is now trying to raise his daughter Katie by himself. When rioting breaks out on the boundary between the two camps in Belfast, Liam finds himself on the wrong side of the line and too injured to get back quickly. Although he is fixed up by a woman who turns out to be Kenny's wife (who is herself estranged), he is picked up by Kenny and Ginger as he tries to get back home. They take him back to the club (now closed) and beat him in hopes of getting information, and it is gradually revealed that Kenny and Liam are childhood friends. This information is left undisclosed to Ginger, although they eventually agree to return Liam to his own part of town. When they drop him on the street, an orgy of accidental violence follows, which leaves Katie dead at the hands of one of her little friends (who had earlier found a gun) and Kenny and Ginger dead at the hands of the British army.

McIlroy and Hill have also explored the rise of the "Troubles film" (both deal specifically with the 1980s) and they set out some thematic aspects of the genre that are especially important in understanding *Nothing Personal*. McIlroy notes that in films about the conflict in N.I. "unwillingness to be historically or locally precise springs not only from fear of being accused of partisanship but also from a fear of confusing the non-Irish audience, those not expected to understand the by-ways of Irish politics as containing vital information for narrative resolution" (1993, 95). This question of narrative resolution is central, for in conventional hollywood films, especially films which could be throughout of as "genre pictures," narrative closure is of central importance. Indeed, John Hill has located the simplifying tendency of most films about the Irish troubles in hollywood's need to resolve narratives neatly and quite unrelated to anything specific to the Irish condition. He writes that "The conventions of 'classical narrative,' with their emphasis on individual characters as the agents of narrative causality, almost inevitably encourage the explanation of events and action in terms of individual psychology rather than more general social, political and economic relations" (150). What McIlroy and Hill agree on, then, is the inherent inadequacy of the hollywood system — based both in globalization (as opposed to attention to local reality) and narrative (as opposed to sometimes inconclusive political analysis) — for clearly representing the northern situation. The structure and content of *Nothing Personal* in some ways subtly resists these kinds of problems, but in other ways falls into the exact trap that they identify.

These two critics, while keenly keyed into the sometimes unapparent ideological limitations of conventional form, set up a somewhat simplistic high art / low art binarism,

a binarism complicated by Leo Braudy (among others). In discussing the function of generic conventions as opposed to "serious" films that explicitly reject such conventions, Braudy notes that "[g]enre films, in fact, arouse and complicate feelings about the self and society that more serious films, because of their bias towards the unique, may rarely touch.... like fairy tales or classical myths, genre films concentrate on large contrasts and juxtapositions" (436, 440). This view of the cultural space that genre occupies is, in many ways, an explicit contradiction of the McIlroy/Hill position. Genre is important for Braudy because of what it reveals about the "large," the communal, and the *social*. Less the product of a single *artistic* (and therefore eccentric or exceptional) vision, genre is, like hollywood cinema, industrial in character, and therefore reflexive of the broad social forces which Hill finds so lacking.

With relation to generic characteristics, *Nothing Personal* lies somewhere in-between the categories of "genre film" and "exceptional/auteur film," and seriously complicates a simple distinction between "national cinema" and "hollywood cinema," a problem with a lot of recent Irish cinema that is discussed in the introduction. The way in which it obeys genre classification is not difficult to see: it is on one level a fairly straightforward thriller, and was discussed as such in most of the popular press. This is hardly surprising, and indeed McIlroy notes that "[b]ecause the films dealing with Northern Ireland invariably grapple with IRA violence, as well as the violence that happens in response, they usually fall within the thriller genre, since it contains all the ingredients necessary for conspiracy, intrigue, murder, and star-crossed lovers" (94) *Nothing Personal* does indeed contain these elements, and their presence no doubt accounts for the film being generally understood in this context. The ways that it violates the Troubles Film genre, however, is

equally apparent. Like *December Bride*, what strikes most immediately is that it deals not with IRA but with Loyalist violence. McIlroy would no doubt find this a significant violation, given that he notes that "[o]ne must look hard for a likable or sympathetic Protestant character in films dealing with Northern Ireland; in fact, one rarely discovers a well-rounded protagonist or antagonist. Quite simply, filmmakers display little interest in developing approaches to the Protestant community" (105). This is visibly not the case here, and while the portrayal of "the Protestant community" is far from romantic (it is indeed seen as quite a violent social space) the development of an approach to the community is *central* here. This re-framing could be taken to suggest that the film should be read outside of the realm of genre, and instead within the context of O'Sullivan's ongoing interest in the diversity of the Irish experience, specifically his interest in unionist traditions of one kind or another (which are visible in each one of his films). While such a re-framing is necessary, it is only part of the task of understanding *Nothing Personal*. The film is important because it negotiates the tension between O'Sullivan's ongoing concerns and the demands of the Troubles Film, in a way that Robin Wood, who has written about ambiguities of genre, would recognize. He writes that "[i]t can perhaps be argued that works are of especial interest when the defined particularities of an auteur interact with specific ideological tensions and when the film is fed from more than one generic source" (479). This film is marked by tensions between hollywood ideology of normalcy, simplicity and closure, the ideology of the assumedly pro-IRA (or at least Protestant-indifferent) Troubles Film, and O'Sullivan's authorial identity as one concerned with marginalized groups and complex politics. It is a genre film, and it is a

Thaddeus O'Sullivan film; it is typical, and it is exceptional. It is clearly a continuation of O'Sullivan's hybridized film practice.

This is not to say that *Nothing Personal* is as radically un-conventional as *A Pint of Plain* or even *December Bride*. Indeed, it contains many of the narrative expectations of the Troubles Film. It is quite clearly tagged as a thriller. This is made clear by settings the early sections of the film in darkly lit, seedy locales such as the aforementioned club or the abandoned gym where the warring paramilitaries secretly negotiate. An assassination carried out by Kenny and Ginger early in the narrative also tag the film quite clearly as a thriller of some kind. That the film holds to this generic convention, if in a sometimes compromised or hybridized way, limits the way in which the conflict in N.I. will be understood. These early images create the expectation of at least basic adherence to the Thriller, and the conventions inherent to that genre (secrecy, violence, suspense) accounts for a part of the N.I. conflict that has already been widely represented outside of Ireland, both in narrative films and journalistic images. Mainstream representations tend to portray N.I. as living in a constant state of being a Thriller, and *Nothing Personal*'s adherence to this genre does little to clarify or complicate recovered notions of life in the province.

There are other aspects of the film, however, which do complicate the way that N.I in general, and Belfast in particular, are typically understood. For example, the detail with which paramilitary activities are evoked is quite unusual for a Troubles Film. The narrative is divided by scenes in which leaders of the opposing paramilitaries meet and negotiate over various issues, not all of which, surprisingly, have to do with peace treaties or cease-fires. During one sequence, the leader of the Republican paramilitaries

complains of someone (who he is sure is from the Loyalist side of town) going around exposing himself to residents of the Republican neighborhood for which he is responsible. The Loyalist leader apologizes and assures him that the problem will be dealt with. The next scene features Kenny and Ginger capturing the man and shooting him in the kneecap. This interest in the role that paramilitary forces play in quotidian life in N.I is quite exceptional, for it shows just how complex their place in war-torn Belfast was. "War-torn" is not an exaggeration in terms, for *Nothing Personal* takes place in 1975, towards the beginning of The Troubles when violence was at its peak. Rather than representing the peak of this violence solely in terms of intense struggles between two clearly defined parties (although this certainly accounts for a significant part of the film), O'Sullivan shows just what measures are often taken in lieu of a breakdown of basic community services, such as police who have no time to take care of such minor problems as chasing flashers. This use of a familiar narrative convention (paramilitary violence) in an unfamiliar way (showing it to sometimes be a brutal form of community policing) is a good indication of the film's overall strategy. On the basis of the familiarity that it develops, it is conventional enough to evoke situations which are not the norm for Troubles Films.

Indeed, the way in which The Troubles, an easily (and often) essentialized conflict, is represented here, is quite unusual in the way that it requires some fairly specific knowledge about Irish culture and politics. The film takes place in 1975, which directly follows the dissolution of the Sunnydale agreement, which collapsed in 1974. Considering that the film was released a full 20 years after the historical setting that serves as the motive for the action, O'Sullivan seems to be assuming an audience with a

fairly long political memory. The 1975 settlement attempt is not often discussed outside of Ireland, possibly because of its failure but more probably because it was simply so long ago. This historical setting is further important because it makes clear how even during a cease-fire, paramilitary violence often continues unabated, a common complaint during the current period of cessation. O'Sullivan uses this sense of time and place, then, to straddle two opposing impulses. On one level the film can be understood as a simple Troubles Film (which may take place in the present, maybe in the past, it's all the same), and this indeed the perspective that Kauffman seems to take in his very short and dismissive review. Considering the film's historical setting (which O'Sullivan makes clear in very few elements of the film beyond a preponderance towards long leather jackets and loud suits) it becomes clear that the film is an evocation how guerrilla warfare has become ingrained into everyday life in N.I. While endless observers of the Troubles have made mention of their cyclical quality, O'Sullivan is up to something different here. That the film draws attention to similarities between 1975 and 1994-96 Belfast (when the IRA cease-fire was in effect) has the effect of normalizing the violence, which is an effect complemented by the quotidian character of some of the paramilitary activity. This is distinct from the cliché that the Irish will always be fighting, because what O'Sullivan shows is that fighting is not the only part of a life during a long war. Internal struggles, basic services, and interpersonal breakdowns are just as central in the narrative of *Nothing Personal*. Seeing the film as an ahistorical chunk of an endless conflict, as Kauffmann seems to (which is, although, a reading that would be quite accurate for many other Troubles Films) obscures O'Sullivan's effort to illustrate how people adjust and regulate even the most brutal and violent of situations.

Nothing Personal is also notable for the way in which it centralizes the duality of Belfast, as opposed to most Troubles Films, which tend to embody a polarized vision of the sides. This is McIlroy's chief complaint against Troubles Films, and he notes that "filmmakers fetishize what they conceive as minority opinions. This reductiveness creates terribly imbalanced fictional renditions" (107). *Nothing Personal* is an exceptional Troubles Film not simply because it lacks this fetish for the minority, but because it visualizes Belfast as a city where duality is central to the sense of place. One of the central events of the narrative is a riot on the barricade dividing the Republican and Unionist sides of the city, and O'Sullivan spends an equal amount of time on each side of that barricade. The city's duality is indeed made clear by the opening shot of the film, which is a close up of two men shaking hands, two men who turn out to be leaders of the opposing paramilitaries. Their relationship throughout the film is shown to be cordial and respectful, and it is quite clearly contrasted to the loudly adversarial relationship that the younger members of their groups maintain. This contrast is clearly meant to show an opposition between age/wisdom and youth/foolishness, and it is important that this concept of age/wisdom is at first embodied by a symbol of unity — a handshake. The men who have been at this for a while know one another and seem to understand that they have to lead relatively normal lives in the midst of all that is going on. The vision of the conflict put forth here, then, is that those who understand it (the older men) approach it not from a linear point of view (as do their younger thugs, whose violent intentions are constantly made manifest) but from an essentially elliptical one. The younger men seek to beat up or kill each other, but the older men seek to maintain normalcy and perhaps (although not necessarily) hegemony for their own side. This echoes Tim Pat Coogan's

assessment that during the late 70s, "there were small but definite signs that some of the Protestant paramilitary leaders had become imbued... with the belief that they should have some of the powers, and trappings, which the Unionist ascendancy had traditionally garnered to themselves" (267). O'Sullivan seems to acknowledge this tendency but tweaks it a bit, showing the Republican paramilitary leader to be equally enamored of respectability. This riff is hardly surprising, since the film is concerned centrally with how people regulate the chaos of N.I. The result of this kind of fetish for the respectable, though, is that those shown to be older and clear thinking also display an assumption that those on the other side of the barricades are their counterpart and must be managed, not their adversary who must be destroyed. This strategy of management, or containment, however, is a very ambiguous, double edged sword in *Nothing Personal*, emphasized when O'Sullivan shows that the bosses who offer condolences to the bereaved families of the "other side" are primarily responsible for perpetuating (or managing), as opposed to ending the violence of N.I. (and probably ending their comfortable positions of power).

The fact that the film centralizes Protestant Loyalists, however, is undercut by the way in which their lives are understood. McIlroy notes that "[v]iolence, and malicious violence at that, seems integral to most filmmakers' conception of the Protestant community" (106). This is certainly true of *Nothing Personal*, which does, after all, revolve around Loyalist *paramilitaries*. Indeed, a central part of the plot is how Ginger is defined, above all, by an especially malicious form of violence (he's quite sociopathic). This character is the element of the film that most closely harkens back to the earlier generation of Troubles films that have aroused so much irritation, since the primary activity that the Protestants in O'Sullivan's film are seen taking part in is (mostly)

sectarian violence. Indeed, unlike *December Bride*, which understands Protestant communities in a way that does not involve from violent conflict, *Nothing Personal* is unable to visualize these communities apart from their violent impulses. The Catholic/Republican community, even though it occupies much less screen time, is in some ways more fully represented, since the main Catholic character is Liam, utterly uninvolved with any violent activity, in addition to the paramilitary thugs who we see from time to time. The only Protestant males in *Nothing Personal* are those associated with violence, and indeed the only non-violent Protestant at all seems to be Kenny's estranged wife, who is, symbolically, a nurse. In this way, the film lives up to some of the most reductive aspects of the Troubles Film that McIlroy identifies, particularly with regards to the way that we come to understand what it means to be a male in Loyalist Belfast.

Nevertheless, the film still fits with what could be called a republican vision of the future of Ireland. Keeping in mind the traditional republican tradition of, as Kearney puts it, "a democratic conflict of ideals" (38), *Nothing Personal* qualifies as an unlikely member of this political genealogy. What O'Sullivan portrays here is a province on fire, but the way in which he does that betrays as definite a republican ideal as December Bride or *A Pint of Plain*. That O'Sullivan sees Belfast not as a city where one party will triumph over another but, as the two paramilitary bosses illustrate, a city that is marked by a conflict between counterparts, betrays his understanding of the diversity of the Irish experience. Of all his films there's no doubt that *Nothing Personal* is the least clearly marked by a heterogeneous vision of Irish selfhood. Nevertheless, the way in which O'Sullivan illustrates the complexity of this conflict is far more steeped in the ideals of

republicanism than Troubles Films which more clearly cast their lot with pro-Irish Nationalists, such as *The Boxer* (which has no Protestant characters with more than 10 lines) or *Some Mother's Son* (which is quite unambiguous in its portrayal of good guys and bad guys).

While it is not as radically unconventional as his previous films, *Nothing Personal* is nevertheless a genre-expanding film. O'Sullivan centralizes character types that most Troubles Films cannot even visualize and portrays Belfast as an inherently, and necessarily, dualistic city. While he indulges in the trope that all Protestant men somehow end up killers, the film still brings together a fairly unusual array of political perspective and shows that those who are fully in command of the situation are able not so much to defeat their opponent, but account for their equivalents on the other side of the barricade. It is a genre film to be sure, but it is one that both embodies some of the most socially relevant aspects and which escapes some of the most politically problematic representational strategies of the Troubles Film.

Conclusion: Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Republican

While the classification of a filmmaker like O'Sullivan as a "republican" may seem deliberately provocative, this is only because of the way that the term has come to be misunderstood in recent years. Richard Kearney's recovery of the potential of this political ideal is central to the Irish condition, since the island is a space of such mandatory heterogeneity. Understanding O'Sullivan as a filmmaker who, like the classical republicans, centralizes concepts of diversity, pluralism, autonomy and

enlightened reason over nationalist passion has a way of putting his work into a focus that has a central bearing on the contemporary Irish condition. As the island as a whole struggles to settle delicate disputes over national identity and the relationship between Britain and Ireland, O'Sullivan's films provide a visualization of a nation that has, even at its most violent and degraded, answered and internalized these questions. His work is truly post-colonial, illustrating a world view that, steeped in heterogeneity as it is, makes it clear that the age of colonialism is over, and offers a glimpse at what it looks like to have moved on.

Conclusion: No Conclusions...

If anything is to be taken from the very different films under discussion here, it is that Irish identity is far more complicated than most contemporary representations suggest. While nobody would suggest that this makes discussion of Irish culture impossible, it certainly makes it more difficult than many scholars take into account, and Ireland's film culture is no exception. These two filmmakers go together so well because of the way that they wrestle with similar issues in different ways and arrive at different conclusions. Indeed, the presence or absence of conclusions is a central divider between the work of Comeford and O'Sullivan: the former's work is compromised, finally, by a frustration at the lack of simple solutions and narrative closure, while the latter's work is completely driven by that very lack of summary. A society like Ireland's, which is recently emerging not only from the history of colonialism but also the shadow of a culturally repressive post-independence climate, has a pronounced need for cultural productions which can evoke the ambiguity of the national moment. The ways that Comerford and O'Sullivan fulfill this mandate, in addition to the ways that they decline to, can show us a great deal about the state of cinema in Ireland.

Perhaps the easiest trap into which a critic can fall is the temptation to unambiguously classify some of these films "Irish" and others "hollywooden" and therefor invalid. While the introduction attempts to set out some of the ways in which the term "national cinema" has been constructed, these films are notable for the way in which they fail to fully live up to almost all of Higson's categories. Far from being a compromising factor, this kind ambiguity is a central part of cultural production in a postmodern era. One only need think of Lyotard's thoughts about the disintegration of meta-narratives in *Le*

condition postmoderne: both hollywood and third cinema are powerful meta-narratives, and neither one is clearly intact in the films under discussion here. In their place is a hybridized form, one which bears some resemblance to both of these larger systems and yet refuses the easy closure or sense of binaries that they both provide. This is especially true of Comerford's early work: *Down the Corner* and *Traveler* feel far tc grubby and politicized to be hollywood films, and yet have a weak narrative drive and the basics of realist illusionism, all the while refusing any of the simple, arguably sectarian political pieties that defined the third cinema movement at its most angry. As both of these filmmakers developed, however, they gradually sunk into more closure/clarity-oriented and conventional narratives: Comerford with the angry and sectarian *High Boot Benny* and O'Sullivan with the very hollywood *Nothing Personal*. Even these later films, though, defy enough conventions to leave them outside the camp of either hollywood or "National" cinema; *High Boot Benny* with its odd mix of aesthetically innovative form and deeply reactionary ideology, and *Nothing Personal* with its combination of narrative linearity, political specificity and generic stretching. Both O'Sullivan and Comerford, then, have in common a disdain for the conventions of either ends of this all-too-simple binary

That a pronounced ideological and formal tension can be seen in two of Ireland's most important independent filmmakers offers a crucial insight on the cultural life of the island at the end of the 20th century. If Ireland is to move from the deeply paradoxical, arguably neo-colonial place that it was during the Free State era into a truly post-colonial space consistent with the ideals of European unification, these two artists make it clear that there's still a fair bit of cultural baggage left to unpacked and dealt with. The roles of

women, protestants, Unionists, and others who fall in between conventional ideals of Irishness (such as travelers, gay people, or even Irish speakers) are yet to be fully worked out in the state apparatus of either the Republic or N.I., and these filmmakers are dealing with the tensions that this lack of closure inevitably creates. What separates them is the approach that they take to this open-endedness. Comerford, especially in *High Boot Benny*, seems extremely angry at the way that traditional Republicanism has failed to deal with the questions of modern Irish life, and expresses this anger through a reductive envisioning of the violence inherent to Donegal's landscape. O'Sullivan, on the other hand, seems quite comfortable with the inevitability of these questions, and especially in *December Bride*, sees them as central to the reality of Irish life. What we see from both of these filmmakers' work, however, is that Ireland and her culture is defined more by questions than answers, and those who fail to make this realization may very well doom themselves to an understanding steeped in binarism, a binarism that, as both Edward Said and Declan Kiberd warn and the failures of *négritude* illustrate, has the potential for more harm than good.

Finally, then, we must conclude with a realization of the impossibility of conclusions on the conflicted, sometimes troubled island of Ireland. This is not to suggest that it is sufficient to throw up one's arms as say "those nutty Irish, they'll never agree on anything," as far too many historians have. Instead, what much of contemporary Irish culture, including the films of Joe Comerford and Thaddeus O'Sullivan, show is that a movement into a unified, post-colonial condition can only come at the cost of abandoning simple notions of fixed identity. Joyce's Leopold Bloom knew this all too well, and while his modernist masterpiece is in very few ways comparable to the work of either

O'Sullivan or Comerford, it shares a common skepticism about the fixity of identity. These kinds of quests are ongoing, and cannot be resolved in the single day of *Ulysses*, in the entire corpus of either Comerford or O'Sullivan, or in any number of romantic nationalist tracts (including Ireland's 1937 constitution). Irish identity, along with the "true path" for an Irish national cinema, is a myth: myths are powerful because they can never truly be verified and true or fantastic, but offer, for those who can engage them critically, crucial insights about the cultures that produce them.

Notes:

[1] The central scholarly work on this concept is David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). This text lays out in highly specific terms the aesthetic and economic roots of the form.

[2] Such people would generally be called "Unionists," as in someone who favors the union between Britain and Ireland. They would also generally be assumed to be Protestant and oftentimes descendants of settlers who came (often from Scotland) in the 17th century. This is not always the case, however, as many Catholics in N.I. consider themselves British, and much of the aristocracy of earlier eras came to identify themselves with the British. All of the qualifiers in the previous sentence point towards some of the complications in enunciating a coherent Irish postcolonialism.

[3] The Free State of Ireland, established in 1921, was not the fully independent republic that many Irish fighters had hoped for. It remained part of the Commonwealth and all members of the Dàil (the new Irish parliament) had to swear an oath of loyalty to the British crown. The acceptance of this semi-independent status lead to the Irish Civil War (1922-23). The Republic of Ireland, a fully independent state, was declared in 1949.

[4] This refers to the Protestant Ascendancy, which emerged during the 18th century, the period that marks the consolidation of pro-British rule over Ireland. Members of the Ascendancy were, as a matter of policy, communicants of the Church of Ireland, the Irish branch of the Anglican church.

[5] The United Irishmen were a non-sectarian group of rebels, led by the Episcopalian Wolfe Tone and comprised largely of Protestants, who attempted an unsuccessful rising in 1798 in an effort to break Ireland away from the United Kingdom. The rising was inspired largely by the French and American revolutions.

[6] de Valera became prime minister of the Republic of Ireland in 1932, after fighting in both the Easter Rising of 1916 and on the side on Sinn Féin (which was opposed to acceptance of the treaty with Britain) in the Civil War. He later established what is still the Republic's most powerful political party, Fianna Fáil (Warriors of Fianna).

[7] The word "cinema" is derived from kino/to move, and is understood throughout this essay to include all moving image art, including film, video, television, various computer art, flipbooks, etc.

[8] Irish Gaelic is usually referred to as "Irish" or "Gaeilge." To say "Gaelic" is generally assumed to refer to Scottish Gaelic, which is similar to Irish but by no means the same language (further, Scottish Gaelic, or Gàidhlig, should not be confused with Scots, which is essentially a dialect of English). Neither *Mise Éire* nor *Saoirse?* have ever been subtitled in any language. When I inquired as to the possibility of finding a subtitled copy at the bookshop in the Irish Film Center, the clerk there laughed politely and said "that's a Gael Linn video, dear. There'd be no subtitled version of that." Gael Linn (which means "We Gaels" or more literally "Gaels with us") is a group devoted to the preservation of

culture in the Irish language, and is seen by some as excessively nationalist and pious. They now distribute the videos of *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?*

[9] A gaeltacht is a region set aside by the government of the Republic as a place where the Irish language is to be spoken as a part of everyday life. The board also has an educational component, and sponsors language schools in the regions. Only about 1% of the Republic can claim Irish as an authentic first language, although it is taught to every student in the Republic beginning in primary school. As a result, just about everyone in the Republic can speak some Irish, although many resent the enforced presence of the language and feel that the government's continued expenditures on it are a waste of money. These kinds of arguments became part of public discourse during the period where Michael Higgins established the Irish language television station Teilifís na Gaeilge (operated by the state-owned station Radio Teilifís Éireann), which has been broadcasting (completely in Irish, except for a few soap operas in Welsh and Gàidhlig) since 1996.

[10] When I viewed the film at the Irish Film Archive, cataloguer Liam Wylie gave me a French subtitled copy, assuming that a Canadian resident would have a better knowledge of French than of the urban dialects of English that are spoken in the film.

[11] This "version" of Irish film is to films by Comerford, O'Sullivan and Quinn as semi-hollywood "mavericks" like Martin Scorsese or Francis Coppola are to the films of American independents such as Jon Jost or Nina Menkes. Another possible analogy is between the films of Spike Lee — political in some ways, but firmly grounded in a capitalist, globalized means of production — and the films of Hailie Gerima or the early Charles Burnett, which reject most (although not all) hollywood/narrative conventions, are made through an essentially artisanal mode of production and screened through a more localized means of exhibition. This split is elaborated on in the introduction.

[12] "Britian" is used in this essay to refer to the island of Great Britain, and should not be confused with "The United Kingdom" or the U.K., which encompasses several islands, Britian and part of Ireland among them.

[13] The documentary influenced films of Bolivian Jorge Sanjines (such as *Blood of the Condor*), or the fragmented, modernist road movie *Touki Bouki*, by Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambety, offer points of contact that, while far from unproblematic, illustrate a common engagement with colonial and neo-colonial influences on the experience of modernity in remote areas.

[14] Smyth was writing in 1980, although his invocation of "a decade ago" seems to refer to the pre-1968 period. "The Troubles," or the current incarnation of the Northern Ireland conflict, are generally understood to have begun in 1968, the beginning of the civil rights movement in that province which challenged, sometimes violently, the hegemony of pro-British Protestants and job and housing discrimination against Catholics.

[15] The title of the chapter from which the above quote is taken is "The Myth of Modernization in Irish Culture."

[16] The question of "national cinema" vs. "film industry" is especially complicated in the Irish situation and is explored briefly in the introduction.

[17] In addition to enjoying a modest international theatrical release, the film was awarded Best Film (Prix Europa) at the 1988 Barcelona Film Festival (Rockett: 1988, 259).

[18] A series of islands off the western shore of Ireland, Conamara has one of the country's largest gaeltacht areas and is arguably the place where the Irish language remains most strongly part of the fabric of everyday life.

[19] Assuming that her mother is in her late 70s (which seems a reasonable guess), that would mean she was a child during the War For Independence (1918-21), the conflict that lead to Irish independence, the founding of the modern Irish state, and the partition of Northern Ireland.

[20] The Gardaí Siochana are the police force of the Republic of Ireland, while the Royal Ulster Constabulary are the police force for Northern Ireland. That Spider is wanted by the *Gardaí*, and not the RUC, contributes to his identity as a criminal as opposed to a revolutionary.

[21] This term is problematic in the context of *Reefer and the Model*. Rockett, Hill and Gibbons seem to take it to mean a strategy that explicitly stands apart from a focus on narrative closure and mimesis. The film's modernist perspective is made manifest by how it calls attention to the artificial nature of the narrative (including the generic conventions which it sometimes fulfills and sometimes self-consciously does not) and its fairly non-linear narrative structure (during the part of the film before the bank robbery).

[22] Mulvey writes that "[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to be looked at ness*" (33, emphasis hers). While the status of The Orphan is not so explicitly sexualized, Mulvey's point about women as raw spectacle, bereft of agency, is highly relevant to this film. Mulvey's article was written as an analysis of the hollywood aesthetic, and *High Boot Benny* departs from that strategy in many ways, but it does not do so completely. Indeed, the ways in which it falls into some of Mulvey's schema is itself illustrative of how the film remains in part within that system.

[23] "The Provos" refers to the Provisional IRA, which is the IRA's current incarnation. This organization was essentially created by a split with the socialist elements of Sinn Féin (who became known as "Official Sinn Féin") in 1969/70.

[24] The plantations of the 17th and 18th centuries saw British (mostly Scottish and Protestant) settlers (often referred to as "the planters") take up residence throughout Ulster. *High Boot Benny* is set on the border between County Donegal (now part of the Republic but also part of Ulster) and County Derry (part of N.I.).

[25] As discussed briefly in the introduction, there is a definite split between a commercial Irish cinema (which is often produced in part or distributed by studios based in Hollywood, California) and an independent, locally produced cinema, of which Comerford is an example (this situation is certainly not unique to Ireland). As mentioned in the introduction, then, the term "Classical Hollywood" should not be taken to mean films made in Hollywood, California, but films made in a realist style, produced in an explicitly commercial framework, and generally fulfilling the schema outlined in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson.

[26] O'Sullivan is arguably the central cinematographer of the Irish new wave, having worked with Joe Comerford on *Traveler* (1982) and his experimental short *Waterbag*

(1974), with Cathal Black on *Pigs* (1984) and his experimental documentary *Our Boys* (1981), and with Pat Murphy on her counter-cinematic national epic *Anne Devlin* (1984).

[27] Ireland has traditionally been divided into four provinces, Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, Connaught in the west, and Ulster in the North. Kearney, by way of introducing this idea of the "Fifth Province," points out that "the Irish [Gaelic] word for province is *coiced* which means fifth" (99).

[28] Much the same could be said for the cinemas of, to choose some random examples, Belgium (which claims internationally known *auteurs* such as Chantal Akerman or Jaco Van Dormal but has very little domestically produced popular cinema), Albania (which, during the communist era quite generously supported a cinema that was very rarely shown outside its borders), Switzerland (who produced such well known figures as Jean-Luc Godard [who was born in Paris but raised in Geneva] and Alain Tanner and created a modest, but again largely domestic, popular cinema) or Denmark (whose cinematic contributions during the silent era are well known but which has, in the sound era, produced only Lars Von Trier as an internationally known filmmaker and which has had almost no domestic cinematic production). For further reading, see Michael Stoil, *Balkan Cinema: Evolution After the Revolution*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1982) [on Albanian cinema]; Peter Cowie, *Scandinavian Cinema* (London: Tantivy Press, 1992) [on Danish cinema]; Hervé Dumont, ed. *Rise and Fall of the Legendary Swiss Film Company* (Zurich: Pro Helvetia, 1991) [on Swiss Cinema].

[29] The word "Loyalist" is generally used when discussing those involved in paramilitary activities, as opposed to the word "Unionist," which denotes someone more moderate in their commitment to keeping N.I. part of the U.K.

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